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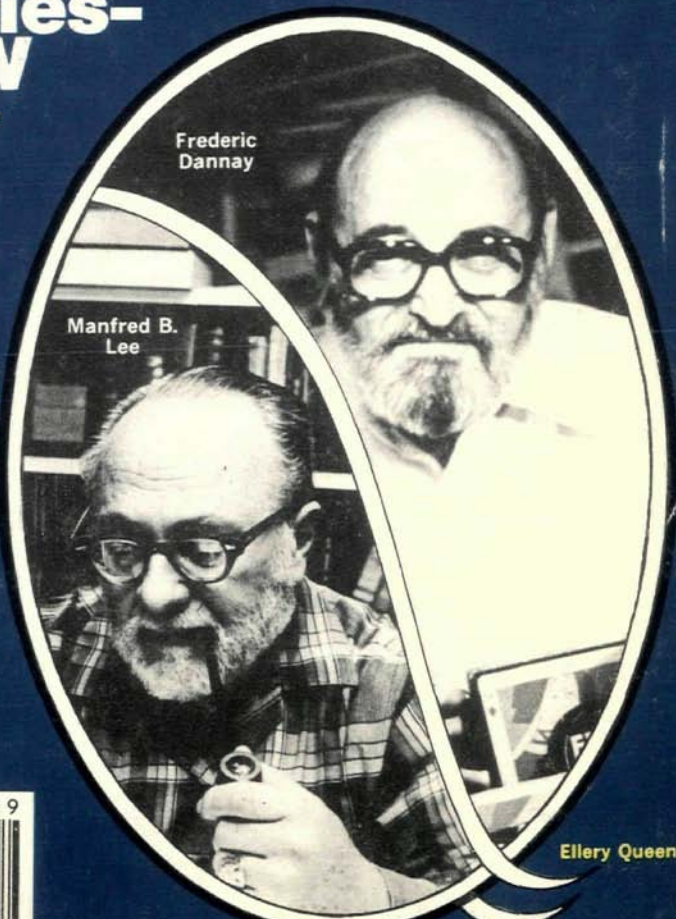

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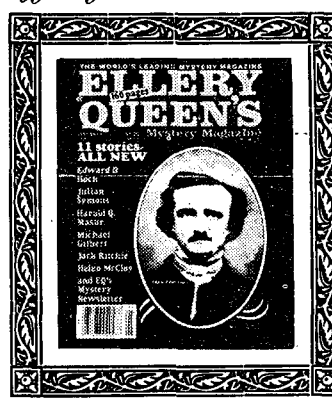

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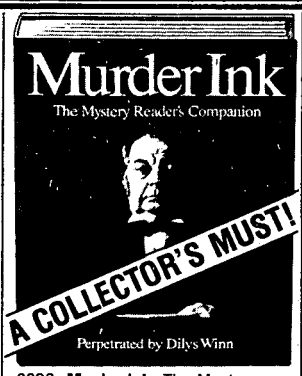

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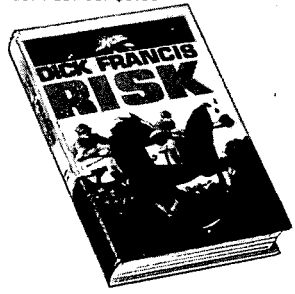

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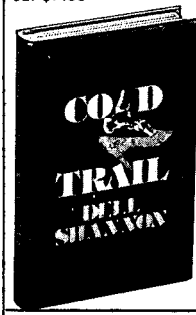

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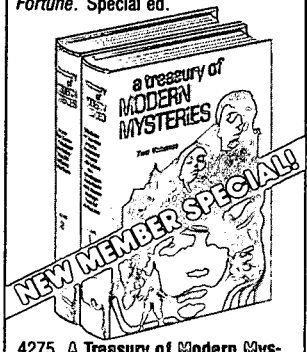

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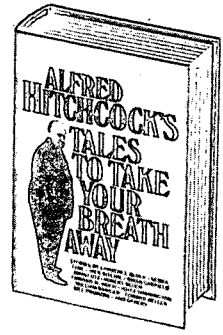

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THE GOURMET KIDNAPER

by JACK RITCHIE

We were not notified of the kidnaping until after the ransom had been paid and the victim returned unharmed, which took the immediacy out of it.

"How much was paid?" Ralph asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars," Cunningham said.

I pondered. Only fifty thousand dollars? That seemed like a rather conservative figure for this day and age, considering that Albert Cunningham's visible estate consisted of acres of wooded and landscaped grounds, a tremendous house, and a covey of functional and recreational outbuildings.

We were in a drawing room considerably larger than my entire apartment and twice as high. Cunningham and his daughter, Stephanie, sat side by side on a sofa opposite.

Cunningham commenced the details. "Monday evening I returned from the city at around eight and stopped my car at the chain we keep across our driveway. Just as I was about to unhitch it, a man stepped out of the darkness of some bushes and pointed a gun at me."

"Could you describe him?" Ralph asked.

"Everything about him seemed about average, except for his full beard. That, of course, I later saw, in a better light, was false."

I grasped the significance of the beard. "Obviously a disguise."

Cunningham studied me for a moment, then continued, "He led

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me down the road a hundred yards or so to another automobile parked at the side of the road."

"Did you get the license number?" Ralph asked, with the faintest of hope.

"I'm afraid not. It was too dark. He then ordered me to lie down on the rear floor of the car where he tied and blindfolded me."

"Was there anyone else in the car?"

"No. My kidnaper appeared to be alone. He drove for more than an hour before he finally stopped."

I nodded sagaciously. "The time of travel is unlikely to give us any true indication of exactly how far he took you from here. He could have made all kinds of devious turns so that you would have no idea of his true route."

Cunningham agreed. "When he finally stopped the car, he untied me, but left me blindfolded. He guided me into a building and down some stairs. When he removed my blindfold, I found that I was in a room approximately twelve by ten feet, its walls consisting of cinder blocks. There were no windows and only one door–a rather heavy one with metal sheathing and which, of course, was kept locked."

"What were the furnishings of this room?" I asked.

"Just a cot, a small table, a chair, and a small electric heater."

"Any reading materials?" I asked.

"No. I spent my time lying on the cot."

"A pity," I said. "You should have requested reading materials. Magazines, specifically."

Naturally they looked at me.

I chuckled. "It is entirely possible that the kidnaper subscribes to magazines, as almost all of us non-kidnapers do. And in an unthinking moment he might have gathered together an armful of his old magazines and brought them to you, forgetting that his mailing address would be on the cover of each one. Had he done this, we would now know his name, address, and the expiration dates of his magazines."

Stephanie Cunningham smiled benevolently. "On the other hand, if my father had been given the magazines, perhaps the kidnaper would belatedly have realized that there were address labels on their covers and that he would then have to kill him to protect his identity."

She smiled at her father now. "Daddy, do you realize that you very likely saved your own life by not asking for magazines?"

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I cleared my throat. "Did you hear any noises? Sounds which might enable you to pinpoint your place of confinement? The whistle of a train on a regular schedule? The roar of airplanes? The howling of dogs?"

"No. Nothing at all, as far as I can recall."

"How long were you kept in this room?" Ralph asked.

"Three days and almost four nights. I never set foot out of that room until Friday morning at about five A.M. when he drove me out into the country and left me tied and blindfolded beside a road. I easily managed to free myself in five minutes and walked to a farmhouse where I phoned Stephanie. She came and picked me up about an hour later."

I drew Ralph to the other side of the room where they could not overhear us.

"Ralph, I don't know what the motive is, but this whole thing could be a fraud. The man was never kidnaped."

"What makes you say that, Henry?"

"The contents of the room."

"What about the contents of the room?"

"Cunningham claims that he was confined to that room for three days and four nights. He also claims that he never left the room for any purpose whatsoever. Yet he made no mention of sanitary facilities. Surely during the course of three days and four nights, he must have had to . . ." I delicately left the sentence hanging in the air.

Ralph thought about that, but not for long. "I'll ask him if there was a lavatory."

"Ralph," I cautioned, "if you put the question to him direct, he will, of course, realize the flaw in his fabrication and quickly create a mythical bathroom for his chimerical place of detention. No, Ralph, I will cleverly question him and back him into a corner."

We rejoined the Cunninghams.

Cunningham spoke first. "By the way, I forgot to mention that there was a chemical toilet in a corner of the room. One of those things that people put in their fishing and hunting cabins."

I cleared my throat. "There is one thing that bothers me. You say that you were dropped off in the countryside after five A.M. this morning. You walked to the nearest farmhouse and phoned. Your daughter picked you up an hour later, which means that it also must have taken her approximately that long to return here. In other words, you got back home before seven this morning, yet you

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did not phone the police until after eleven."

There was a silence on the part of Cunningham and then he sighed. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't at all certain whether I should call the police or not. He really wasn't such a bad fellow at all. Quite polite, and he kept reassuring me that I had nothing at all to worry about. He said that even if the ransom were not paid, he would still release me unharmed at the end of the week."

I shrugged. "Undoubtedly a ploy to neutralize any attempt to escape."

"Perhaps," Cunningham said. "However, he also urged me to think of the fifty thousand dollars as a loan. He would pay it all back some day, plus any reasonable amount of interest I might choose to impose."

Cunningham sighed. "When I got home I gave the matter considerable thought. I wondered whether I really should create additional trouble for the man. He might legitimately and desperately need the money. And, after all, what is fifty thousand dollars?"

Ralph and I looked at each other.

"To me," Cunningham added.

Stephanie smiled. "We finally decided that perhaps it was our duty as citizens to report the matter to the police, on the assumption that no matter what the mitigating circumstances, kidnaping is still an anti-social act." She glanced at her watch. "It is high noon and feeding time. Would you care to join us?"

"Well," Ralph said, "maybe some coffee."

In the dining room, however, places had already been set for Ralph and me and we did not protest.

I buttered a slice of white bread. "You say that this man wore a false beard? You never saw him without it?"

"Never. I wouldn't be able to identify him without it. However . . ."

I pounced. "However what?"

"Well, there *was* something slightly familiar about him. Something about his eyes and his forehead. And yet I am positive that I never saw him before in my life."

"Are you certain that your kidnaper was a man?" I asked. "After all, a beard can be quite comprehensive."

Cunningham selected a slice of rye bread. "He wore a T-shirt occasionally."

Ralph put marmalade on his white bread. "There was just this one man? He didn't have any accomplices?"

"If he did, I didn't see them."

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Stephanie took her white bread without butter or marmalade.

That made it three white. One rye. Why did it strike me that there could be something of significance in that?

Stephanie supplied further information. "I got the phone call at about midnight. The man told me that he'd kidnaped my father and he wanted fifty thousand dollars for his return. Small bills, naturally. He said he'd give me three days to get it together and then he would phone again and give me directions on how to get the money to him. I was not to call the police or he would kill Dad."

Cunningham corroborated. "He apologized to me for having to make the threat, but felt that in a situation like this it was *de rigueur*."

Stephanie agreed. "I got the money together and he phoned again Thursday night, which was yesterday. He told me to put the money into a briefcase and drive west on Highway 94 until I got to the turnoff ramp for Ionia. At the bottom of the ramp I would find an arterial stop sign. I was to leave the briefcase in the tall grass beside it. And I did. Then I found the entrance ramp and went back up onto Highway 94. Actually, I saw the kidnaper pick up the money. He must have been waiting."

I frowned thoughtfully. "You mean that you actually saw the briefcase being picked up?"

"Yes. From up on the highway. I looked back down and the ramp is lighted, you know. And I saw this bearded man appear, pick up the briefcase, and scoot toward a car parked at the side of the road."

"Did you, by any remote chance, follow him? At least long enough to get his license number?"

"No. I didn't want to do anything that might alarm him. After all, he still had my father."

I turned to Cunningham. "Did this kidnaper seem to be intelligent?"

He blinked. "Well, I didn't give him an I.Q. test, but from what talk we had I'd say that he could easily hold his own."

I addressed Stephanie. "Who else besides you knew about the kidnaping?"

"No one. I didn't even tell the servants. As far as they're concerned, my father was simply off on a business trip."

My eyes went to the bit of rye bread in Cunningham's fingers. "During your days of confinement, what were you fed? Hamburgers? Hot dogs? TV-dinners?"

"No. As a matter of fact, the meals I was served were actually

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delicious. My kidnaper was a superb cook. I ate everything brought to me."

"Your kidnaper cooked those meals for you? How do you know?"

"He told me. I mean after Wednesday's *Weiner Schnitzel* I offhandedly said, 'Give my compliments to the cook,' and he told me that he did all of the cooking himself."

"Mr. Cunningham, are you allergic to white bread?"

"No."

"Then you eat rye bread by choice?"

"Yes. I just don't like the taste of white bread." He thought for a moment. "But I do happen to be allergic to tomatoes. They make me break out in a rash."

I was on the scent. "You mentioned that during your confinement you ate everything presented to you. Did that include white bread?"

"There was no white bread. Just rye."

I nodded relentlessly. "You had three breakfasts, three luncheons, and three dinners?"

"Yes."

"And at these luncheons and dinners, were you served a salad?"

"Yes."

"The same salad every time?"

"No. They were varied."

"And in any of these six salads, did you find a single shred or bit of tomato?"

"No."

"Ha," I said. "And you were served rye bread? Not white?"

"Rye bread."

"Did you *request* this rye bread?"

"No. It came with the food."

"No white bread was ever offered instead of rye?"

"No."

I smiled triumphantly. "Mr. Cunningham, we live in a white-bread society. White bread is automatically offered at every meal. And yet it was not offered to you even once. And further, despite being served six varied salads, not one of them contained so much as a sliver of tomato." I rubbed my hands. "All the pieces are beginning to fit together."

"That's nice," Stephanie said.

I nodded. "First of all, does it not strike you as rather odd that the kidnaper would leap out of the bushes to claim the ransom money practically as the depositor's taillights were disappearing

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into the darkness? Should he not have cautiously waited for at least a little while, on the possibility that this might be a police trap? How did he *know* that the police had not been called into the case?"

None of them, of course, had the answer.

I smiled grimly. "He *knew* that the police had not been brought into the case because his *accomplice* had given him that information. And that accomplice is in this very house."

There was an awed silence and then Stephanie said, "But the only person in this house who knew about the kidnaping and that I did not call the police is me. Are you saying that I had a part in this kidnaping just because I get a miserly allowance and need the extra spending money desperately?"

Cunningham smiled fondly. "I've arranged that Stephanie gets no substantial amount of money from me until she's thirty and has accomplished something in this world on her own. I think it builds character, or it should."

Stephanie pursued her point. "Are you insinuating that just because my father said that the kidnaper looked vaguely familiar–despite that itchy false beard–that he might have been one of my numerous boy friends and that we were in cahoots?"

"Tut, tut," I said charitably. "I have other fish to fry. Let me reconstruct the 'compliments to the cook' incident. When you uttered those words, Mr. Cunningham, did your kidnaper not *blink* first, and then, quickly recovering, say that *he* did the cooking?"

"What are you getting at, Henry?" Ralph asked.

I nailed it down. "This kidnaper knew Mr. Cunningham's eating preferences and allergies. He did not have to be told."

Ralph was not impressed. "So he did a little research on Cunningham before he pulled the snatch."

I shook my head. "That simply doesn't wash, Ralph. What kidnaper would risk his precious anonymity by going about asking the food idiosyncracies of his intended victim? If he were so concerned about the matter, it is much more likely that he would ask his victim *after* he had kidnaped him. Mr. Cunningham, who knows that you eat only rye bread and are allergic to tomatoes?"

"I suppose a lot of my friends might. After all, I've led a full life."

"Your meals were served piping hot?"

"Yes."

I chuckled. "Do you know *why* your kidnaper blinked and suddenly volunteered the information that *he* was the one who did the cooking?"

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Cunningham rubbed his jaw. "I still don't remember the blink."

"I assure you, sir, there *was* a blink. And for a very good reason. When you offered your compliments to the cook, your kidnaper suddenly realized that there existed the possibility that you might *recognize* the cooking. And he wanted to thwart that immediately."

"Recognize the cooking?"

I nodded. "Are you familiar with your own basement? Your own cellars?"

"Not particularly. I suppose there are probably some parts of this house where I've never set foot."

"I thought as much. It is my contention that when you were bound and blindfolded, you were driven in a great circle and brought directly *back to your own home* and led to a place of confinement in your own cellars."

There was a respectful silence and then Ralph said, "How do you arrive at that, Henry."

"The kidnaper had to have an accomplice. Someone who *knew* what Mr. Cunningham did and did not eat. Someone who could prepare delicious meals and see that they were served piping hot. And being here on the premises, the kidnaper would have *known* that the police had not been called into the case and that it was safe to pick up the money."

My smile wrapped things up. "I do not know her name. I have never seen her before, but I'll wager that if you step into your own kitchen, you will find your cook dreaming about what she will do with her share of fifty thousand dollars."

Cunningham's face became extremely thoughtful.

I rose. "Shall we interrogate the cook? What is her name, by the way?"

"Matilda," Cunningham said. He seemed to pull himself together. "There is just one thing wrong with your theory, Sergeant Turnbuckle."

"What is that?"

"The meals I ate in that basement room were absolutely delicious. And the simple fact is that our Matilda is a terrible cook."

Stephanie confirmed that. "Frankly we would fire her, but she's such a dear soul and she means well and tries her best."

I looked down at my plate. Here, while I had been talking, I had also been wrestling with a portion of stubborn Swiss steak. Also the mashed potatoes were lumpy and watery. The broccoli was definitely dead. There was no question about it, Matilda was a dreadful cook.

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I sipped some coffee, which was bitter. "On the other hand, for those three days, Matilda may very cleverly have cooked superb meals just to throw us off the track."

Ralph had had enough to eat too. "I guess we'll be getting back to headquarters now."

In our car I brooded. "It is still possible that this kidnaping never took place at all. Or, if it did, Stephanie may indeed have had a part in it. We will have to observe if she spends above her allowance, whatever that is."

On Monday, a little after quitting time, Ralph had already gone home, when the phone at our desk rang. I glanced about hoping someone else would answer it, but no one was available. I picked up the receiver.

It was Stephanie Cunningham. "How is the case going?"

"We are diligently pursuing the matter. Something may break at any moment."

"Just as I thought. You're hopelessly stymied. How about coming over to our place for dinner tonight?"

A thought came to me. It had never been officially ascertained whether Stephanie herself might not secretly be a magnificent cook. Perhaps if I craftily got her to prepare a–

"We're starting to invite people over for dinner again," Stephanie said. "We've got a new cook and he's absolutely superb."

"He?"

"Yes. Father had a little talk with Matilda after you left and accidentally discovered that she had a brother who's a chef in a Sheboygan restaurant. So he drove right up there and hired him."

"What about Matilda?"

"We're not throwing her out into the cold. She'll be his assistant or whatever. Franz was just about to open a restaurant up there, but Daddy somehow persuaded him to come and work for us. Daddy claims that Franz is so good he's already paid him two years' salary in advance."

At the Cunningham residence I found the occasion to peek into the kitchen.

I saw a short stocky man with blondish hair and a slightly bulging forehead presiding cheerfully over steaming pots on the kitchen range.

I also saw a short stocky woman with blondish hair and a slightly bulging forehead amiably chopping onions.

I pictured them both wearing beards. Yes, the bulging foreheads

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would suggest a certain filial relationship, which had, however, escaped Cunningham's attention until my words had created a comparison.

Had Matilda been Franz's accomplice?

I doubted it. Otherwise she would not have been so free to volunteer that she had a brother in Sheboygan.

But she and Franz had probably exchanged visits now and then, during which time Franz had learned of Cunningham's food preferences. And during the kidnaping itself–and Franz had probably taken Cunningham to some Sheboygan area cellar–he had undoubtedly phoned Matilda daily and learned in casual conversation that no member of the household staff was aware of the kidnaping and that obviously therefore the police had not been called into the case.

Had Cunningham presented Franz with an ultimatum? Exposure or kitchen service?

And could I now get Cunningham to testify against his new jewel of a cook? Do people who go to great lengths to find good cooks volunteer to send them to prison?

Of course not.

Ah, well.

At dinner I found the beef with Chinese black mushrooms absolutely delicious.

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A PLACE OF HER OWN

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

If you asked me when she first showed up on the corner, I couldn't tell you. One day she just started being a regular part of the scenery, like Carvel's and Waldbaum's, and then she was always there. Summer and winter, rain or shine, she was there sitting on the sidewalk like patience on a monument. In the good weather she'd sometimes go across the street to the opposite corner where there was a tree and a mailbox and sit between them. But most of the time she would be scrunched down in a little covered-over space, like a shallow cave, right between Carvel's and the bank. That was her place.

I was surprised that the bank let her stay there where everybody going in or coming out could see her. Not good for business, if you know what I mean. I thought about saying something to the manager, but it wasn't my bank.

Once in a while she'd be gone. The first time I went by and she wasn't there I said to myself, "Oh, boy! A good thing. Somebody picked her up. The police or the loony squad. Either way, a good thing. She's not making a disgrace of the neighborhood."

But the next day she was back, crouching in her cave, drinking

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coffee from a paper container and staring around with her crazy eyes. I can tell you, it gave me a shock to have those eyes staring at me when I wasn't expecting it, but I just walked on as if nothing had happened. I never missed a day of work in my life, and the only times I was ever late was when the subway got itself messed up. By the time I got to the station my heart had stopped pounding and all I could think about was squeezing onto the train.

After that I was always ready for her. I could see from a block away if she was there, and I could walk fast and keep my eyes looking the other way. Or I could walk on the other side of the street. But ready or not, something always made me look at her. Not right in the face, but at some part of her clothes or her feet or the top of her head. I couldn't go by without one quick look.

She always wore a coat, summer and winter. Sometimes she had it all buttoned up, other times slung over her shoulders like a model in a magazine. Underneath the coat she wore sweaters. Even on summer days when the temperature got in the nineties and everybody else was dying from the heat, sweaters. And baggy dirty slacks. I got the impression she wore a couple pairs of slacks at once. She looked like a great big bundle of old clothes. If you didn't look at her face, you could just walk by like she was some pile of garbage waiting to be picked up.

I took my vacation in August and went to Ohio to visit my married daughter, Ellen. I have to go to her. She won't come to visit me. When she got married, she said to me, "Momma, I hope you won't be hurt, but I'm getting out of this crummy town and I'm never coming back."

Well, I'm not hurt. Why should I be? It's pretty where she lives. Grass and trees around the house. Everything clean. She has a nice new car to drive around in. The kids, God bless them, almost grown up and never sick a day in their lives. Only they hardly remember me from one visit to the next. Their other grandmother lives nearby. She's a nice lady, I guess. The kids show me all the presents she gives them—ten-speed bicycles, a record player for Kathy, Timmy's racing-car setup in the basement. Those are nice things to give your grandchildren. I brought them presents, too—small things I could carry on the plane. Nothing special.

This time Ellen said to me, "Momma, you've been working over thirty years in that store. You could retire anytime you want. Wouldn't you like to stop working and come and live with us?"

She doesn't understand. It's not just a store. After her father died,

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rest his soul, I was lucky to get a job there. Ellen was only five years old. What does she remember about that time? But I remember how frightened I was the day I walked into the Personnel Office. Artie was a good man, but he didn't leave any insurance or anything else. He never expected to be taken off so young. So I had to get a job, quick, and I'd never worked a day in my life.

I was so nervous that day when they showed me how to work the cash register. Artie used to give me just enough money to buy food with and everything else he took care of himself. So it scared me to have all that money that wasn't mine passing through my hands every day. But I got used to it after a while, and I got used to having money of my own, too. So much for the rent, so much to live on, so much to save. And it's a good thing I saved because when Ellen got grown up, she wanted to go to college and that's where she met her husband. So it all worked out. If it wasn't for the store, Ellen wouldn't be living in her pretty house, with a dentist for a husband and two fine kids, and she ought to understand that.

Sometimes I think she's a little ashamed of me. Once, when I was there visiting, she had some of her neighbors over for coffee in the afternoon, and when she introduced me, she said, "This is my mother. She's a buyer for a big New York department store." Well, it was only a little lie, but I felt my face getting red. I couldn't correct her. That would only have made things worse. So I just smiled and hoped nobody would be interested enough to ask me any questions about my job. They weren't. Fact of the matter is, I am a saleswoman in the Ladies Foundations Department and that's where I've been for over 30 years. I'm not ashamed of it even if Ellen is.

When my vacation was over and she was driving me to the airport, she brought it up again. "You're too old to keep on working, Momma," she said. "Peter and I talked it over and we'd be happy to give you a home with us. I worry about you all alone in that awful little apartment. There's so much violence these days. You'd be safe out here with us."

Well, I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying what I wanted to say. The "awful little apartment" had been my home for more years than I had worked in Ladies Foundations. It was the home that Artie and I made together when we were young and I wasn't about to leave it now that I'm old. It had been Ellen's home, too, although she didn't seem to want to remember that she'd had some happy times there and there was always good nourishing food on the table.

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What I said was, "I still have your bedroom suite. Good as new. Maybe Kathy would like to have it for her room. I could ship it out."

She laughed. "My God, Momma! Get rid of it. Give it to the Salvation Army. All pink ruffles and flounces, wasn't it? I can't believe I used to pretend I was some kind of movie star in that room. No, thanks. But whenever you're ready, you just get rid of all that junky old furniture and we'll set you up with a room of your own, a television, everything you need. Peter says we might be able to put in a swimming pool next year."

I thought about those things on the plane, and I thought about what I would really want to do with myself when the time came that I wouldn't be getting on the subway every morning and going to the store. It wasn't yet, but it would be soon. Three more years? It would be nice being right there to watch Kathy and Timmy grow up and get married. But the fact of the matter is that outside of Ellen herself, I've never been around teen-aged kids very much. They seem kind of large and noisy. And I have a television. Small, but perfectly good. I got it on sale at the store, which, with my discount, made it a very good buy. And what would an old lady like me want with a swimming pool? I haven't been in swimming since Ellen was 15 and we went for a week to the Jersey shore, and even then I only got my feet wet up to my knees.

I took a cab from the airport. Expensive, but I was tired and the next day was already Monday and the end of my vacation. I'd have to go back to work. It was a heavy evening, humid and overcast, and the whole world was a dirty gray color. By the time we got off the expressway, it had begun to rain and the cab driver, like everyone else trying to squeeze through the weekend traffic, was scowling and muttering curses. For a moment I thought maybe Ellen was right and I ought to pack up and leave all this behind.

But then we swung onto a familiar street and home was only a few blocks away. I leaned forward to give the driver directions and through the rain-streaked windshield I saw her. She was crouched down in that little sheltered corner by the bank, a sheet of plastic tucked in around her knees. All around her she had boxes and shopping bags tied with string, and parked at one side she had a Waldbaum's shopping cart piled high with God knows what kind of rubbish. And right in the middle of all this she squatted, staring out into the rain. She stared right into the cab as we drove by and I felt sure she recognized me. It seemed as if she shouted something, but I couldn't hear her.

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The driver said, "Which way, lady?"

So I told him where to turn, and in less than a minute I was paying him off with a good tip because he helped me carry my luggage up to the door. Before he left, he said, "How do I get out of this crummy neighborhood?" So I told him that and then I dragged my luggage indoors.

Home. I looked around the lobby and it was just the same as it always was. But for some reason I began to remember that years ago there used to be a red-leather settee and a couple of armchairs over against the wall. There was nothing there now. I couldn't remember when they'd been taken away. Then I remembered that on the wall, over the settee, there used to be a picture. Horses, I think. Or sailboats. Something outdoorsy. Now, if you looked very closely you could just about make out where it had hung, but the wall was so dirty everything had blended into the same shade of grimy green. The floor was dirty, too, and not just because it was raining and people had been tracking it up with wet feet. Whatever happened to the rubber mat the super used to put down when it rained? I guess a lot of things had changed over the years, and I'd just never noticed.

I pushed the button for the elevator, and while I was waiting I glanced over at the mailboxes. My neighbor across the hall, Mrs. Finney, had been picking up my mail while I was away, so there was no reason for me to check my mailbox. Still, I noticed that some of the little metal doors were bent and hanging loose. Not mine, but some of the others. How long had they been like that? And why didn't the super get them fixed?

Next to the mailboxes a sign had been taped to the wall. From where I stood I could read the big print at the top. It said: ATTENTION ALL TENANTS, and there was a lot of small print underneath. I was about to go and look at it, but the elevator door opened, so I dragged my luggage on and pushed the button for the sixth floor.

I don't know if it was because I was so tired, or because of the change coming from Ellen's pretty house with the trees and grass around it, or because I was finally seeing things the way they really were, but when I got inside my apartment and turned on the lights I could have cried. Nothing had changed in my apartment. Everything was just as I had left it. It wasn't even dusty or bad-smelling because Mrs. Finney, when she brought in the mail, would always open the windows and give the place a quick once-over, which I would do the same for her when she was away. No, it was something

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else, something inside me that turned on like a searchlight and made everything look shabby and old. Worn out. Like Ellen said, junk.

The living-room suite, that Artie and I bought with the money his folks gave us for a wedding present, was covered with summer slipcovers just like every summer. The slipcovers weren't as old as the furniture. I got new ones every few years or so from the store. How long ago did I get these? Whatever, there were holes in them and the brown plush underneath was showing through. That made me think of the places on the couch cushions and the arms where the brown plush was worn down to the shiny material. Old, right? Junk.

Same thing with the rug, the coffee table, the bookcase with Ellen's old books in it, even the draperies at the windows. Everything was old, shabby, faded, chipped, ready for the junk collector. Even the television was an old black-and-white set that I'd bought back in the days of Uncle Miltie and Howdy Doody. For Ellen.

I went into Ellen's room. I don't know what made me keep her room just the way she'd left it. Maybe I always thought she'd come back for a visit, in spite of what she said. The bedroom suite was a present I got for her when she started high school, so she'd feel like a young lady, no longer a baby, and have girl friends over to visit. I remember how proud she had been of her room.

This time I didn't turn on the overhead light. Maybe that's what made the living room look so awful. I walked into the room to where there were two little pink-shaded lamps sitting on the vanity table. I turned on one of those instead. The room was small, I have to admit that—smaller than the room I'd stayed in at Ellen's house. And most of it was taken up with the bed. I'll never forget the look on her face the day the delivery truck from the store came and the men carried that furniture upstairs and even helped put the bed together. When she saw them put the canopy on top, I thought she would never stop smiling and dancing around and squealing. "Oh, Momma! It's beautiful! I love it!" Those were her exact words. I guess people change.

Now, in the rosy glow from the vanity lamp, I could see that the canopy was sagging and the pink quilted bedspread and dust ruffle had turned the color of old underwear. The pink net skirt on the vanity table, which I'd made myself, was droopy and frayed at the bottom, and the white paint on the bedposts and on the chifforobe was dingy and gray. Maybe if I scrubbed it down . . .

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The door buzzer sounded. I got my face ready with a smile because right now it would be very good to have some company and forget all this gloom that was making me feel like a worn-out piece of junk myself. But before I got to the door I took the smile away just in case it was some creep going through the building looking for old ladies to molest. Don't laugh. It happened in the next block. Thank God the landlord put peepholes in all our doors. I looked through and it was Mrs. Finney from across the hall.

Right away when she came in she said, "Did you eat yet, Lillian? I brought some Danish."

That's Grace Finney. Always worrying about whether people got enough to eat. A good person.

"I ate on the plane, but I could have some Danish. Why don't I make some coffee?"

She followed me into the kitchen, and again I noticed things, like the worn spot on the linoleum in front of the sink and the scars on the table that made it look like it had been through the wars. But I put it all out of my mind so I could tell Grace about Ellen and her family and how well they were doing. She put the Danish down on the table while I filled the kettle and got out the instant coffee.

"Did you read your mail yet?" she asked. "No. I can see you didn't. Wait a minute."

And she raced out to the living room where the mail was stacked on the coffee table and came back waving an envelope.

"Wait'll you see this," she said. "And there's nothing we can do about it. Not a damn thing."

It was unusual for Grace Finney to swear. She prided herself on being a lady and got her hair done every Saturday morning at Gwen's around the corner. So it must be something really bad.

I looked at the envelope.

"Open it. Open it," she said.

It hadn't come through the mail. There was no stamp on it and no address. Only my name, Mrs. Lillian Curry, written out in big black letters.

"We all got one," she said. "It came right after you left. It's a shame. A crying shame. Read it."

I opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper. I pulled it out and right away across the top I saw: ATTENTION ALL TENANTS.

"What is this?" I said. "I saw it downstairs but I didn't stop to read it."

"Read," she commanded. "You'll cry. If I tell you, I'll get so mad

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I don't know what I'll do. Old Mr. Zukowski in 2D, when he read it, he had a heart attack and he's still in the hospital. Nobody knows if he'll ever get out alive."

So I read. And then I turned the kettle off. And then I sat down on a kitchen chair, the one that wobbled a little. Coming on top of the way I was feeling, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry over what the piece of paper said. I guess it's safe to say I was stunned, because I just sat there with my head going around and the words on the paper getting all blurry when I tried to read it again to make sure it was really true.

What it boiled down to was this. The building had been sold and the new owner was going to tear it down. All the other apartment buildings on the block, too. In place of a lot of rundown little buildings he was going to put up a brand-new giant building with lots more apartments. We all had to get out within two months, because after that all the services would be shut off. We could all come back if we wanted to and get apartments in the new building. At the end they tried to take the curse off it by saying what a great thing it was for the neighborhood and how projects like this would help put an end to urban decay.

Urban decay. Junk. Everything was turning into junk. They wanted to turn us all over to the junk collectors. Buildings, bedroom suites, people, even an old dog wouldn't be safe. Could they give me a new body, a new life to live in the new building? I could feel words choking in my throat, and I must have made some kind of noise, because Grace was shaking me and bending over to stare in my face.

"Are you all right?" she demanded. "Don't you go having a heart attack on me. Here, I'll make the coffee."

She rattled around and pretty soon a cup of black coffee was on the table beside the Danish.

"Eat," she said. "It's from Dubin's."

So I ate a bite of Danish and I sipped some coffee. And I have to admit I felt better, but still not clear in my head.

"I'm leaving," said Grace. "I'm not waiting around while this place turns into a ghost building and the scavengers start breaking the windows and stealing the pipes off the walls. The moving truck is coming in the morning. I found a place out in Queens. The rent is more, but at least it's clean and they won't be tearing it down around my ears. You ought to leave, too."

"But I just got back."

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"Yeah, I know. It's a shock. You need a little time to get used to the idea. But don't wait too long. You know what happens to empty buildings. It's not safe."

"Where is safe? Ellen wants me to go out and live with them. She says it's safe."

"She's a good daughter, Ellen. You ought to go. I wish I had a daughter like that. All I have is that bum, my son, who can't even hold a job. Forty years old and still trying to figure out what to do with his life. Well, I have to go. I still have a lot of packing to do. I just didn't want you to be alone when you got the news. You'll be all right now? Have the rest of the Danish for breakfast."

I sat there at the table for a while. The coffee got cold and a roach got brave and ran across the drainboard. I didn't even get up to chase him. I always keep my kitchen spotless, no food lying around, so the roaches won't come. But they come anyway. You can't get away from them in these old buildings. Maybe the new building wouldn't have any roaches. Maybe I could find a place to stay in the neighborhood, a room somewhere nearby, and move into the new building when it gets finished.

That's what the piece of paper said, that we could all move back in and have nice new apartments. But what about the rent? New apartments don't come cheap. And what would I do with my furniture in the meantime? How long does it take to build a giant apartment house? A year, two years? Come to think of it, how would my junky old furniture look in a brand-new apartment? Come to think of it, would I live that long?

I shivered. It wasn't cold, only like the old saying goes, somebody was walking on my grave. Wherever that would be. I'd never thought about that before, but now it came through like a *Daily News* headline. A place to die. I wouldn't be looking for a place to live. I'd be looking for a place to die.

It was crazy, but the thought made me feel better. I wrapped the Danish up in plastic and put it in the breadbox. And then I went to polish my shoes. Tomorrow was Monday, and I never went to work on Monday without polishing my shoes.

In the morning I put on a black dress. I know things are different now, but back when I started working in the store we all had to wear black dresses and I never got out of the habit. Sometimes I'll wear brown or navy blue, but that's as far as I'll go. Not like some of the other girls who wear pantsuits in turquoise or lavender. It wouldn't be right.

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I ate the rest of the Danish I had started and had a cup of coffee. There wasn't much else to eat, and I would have to stop at Waldbaum's on my way home. There was one Danish left over, so I put it in a bag to take with me for my coffee break. When I left the building, the moving truck was already in front and Grace Finney's upright piano was standing on the sidewalk. She could only play *Chopsticks*, but she'd bought it years ago when her boy said he wanted to study music. He'd never even learned *Chopsticks*, but Grace hung on to the piano and used to let Ellen play whenever she wanted to. I walked away fast. I didn't want to be late for work on my first morning back from vacation.

The subway station was three blocks away, and as soon as I turned the corner I saw her. I didn't see her exactly, but I saw her shopping cart parked in its usual place outside the bank, so I knew she was there. I kept on walking fast, and I kept watching the toes of my shiny black shoes going one, two, one, two in front of me. I didn't look up when I passed her, and I don't know what made me do it, but I put the bag with the Danish in it on top of the mound of old junk in her shopping cart. I was trembling so bad when I got to the change booth, I could hardly pick up my tokens.

The only thing different about the store when I got there was that they had the new fall merchandise on display. When I had left, they were getting rid of the last of the summer stuff. But Ladies Foundations doesn't change much from season to season. A girdle is a girdle, even though they keep coming out with new kinds of fabrics and new styles. It felt good to be back, and right away before the opening bell rang I started checking over the shelves and drawers so I'd know if we were running low on any sizes.

Miss Kramer, the floor manager, came by before I'd gotten very far, and she said, "Good morning, Lillian. Welcome back. Did you have a good vacation? I'd like to see you in my office if you have a few minutes."

So I said, "Good morning. Thanks. Yes. I'll come right now."

I followed her across the floor and into the corridor behind the fitting rooms where her office was, all the way wondering what she wanted to talk to me about. It had been over a year since my last raise, so maybe that was it. I could sure use a raise if I was going to have to find a new apartment. I had a little money saved up, but the way prices were going higher all the time, it was getting harder and harder to save anything.

"Sit down, Lillian," she said.

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So I sat down in the little straight chair in front of her desk and she sat down in the swivel chair behind her desk. She looked at me for a second and then she started flipping through some cards in a metal box. She pulled one out.

"Lillian," she said, "you've been with us for over thirty years."

"Yes," I said, feeling proud and smiling a little. It was sure to be a raise. It always started like that; how long you've been there and what a good employee you were and how you've earned a little extra in your paycheck.

"And you've been in Ladies Foundations all that time," she went on. "You've received five letters of commendation from the President, your attendance record is perfect, and your sales record is steady."

I just nodded and held my breath. I couldn't say a word. It was coming now. I just wondered how much it would be. My hands were getting clammy and I wished I had brought a handkerchief.

Miss Kramer took a deep breath, bulging out her chest, and looked at the wall behind my head. "Lillian," she said, "you're sixty-two years old. Have you thought about how you will spend your retirement years?"

"What!" I said. "No! There's plenty of time for that."

"Well, that's just the point," she said. "There isn't plenty of time. We're cutting back on staff, and we'd like you to take early retirement."

It was like a knife cutting into my heart, cutting off the blood, cutting off the air to my lungs. I couldn't breathe. I got cold all over. There was a pain somewhere inside that wouldn't stay still and wouldn't let go.

I must have scared Miss Kramer. She must have thought I was going to faint or have a stroke or something. She got up out of her chair and ran around her desk and held me by the shoulders.

"Lillian," she whispered, "are you all right? Do you want to lie down?"

"No," I said. And I shook myself a little, so she would let go. I couldn't let her see that I was weak enough to fall off the chair, so I held on to the seat with both hands.

She backed off a little but kept her eyes glued to my face. "Do you understand, Lillian?" she said. "You've worked a long time and you've been a good employee, but now it's time for you to take it easy. You'll get your pension and you'll always have your discount. And we'll keep up your medical insurance. We're not going to throw

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you out and forget about you. You'll always be a member of the family."

"No," I said. "I won't go. You can't make me. What about my regulars? They always ask for me."

"Lillian, nothing lasts forever. If I were you, I'd be glad to have a chance to rest and do what I want to do. Don't you have a daughter and grandchildren somewhere out west? Think how glad they would be if you could spend more time with them."

"No. I don't want to go out there and be an old lady stuck in a room with nothing to do. I've always worked. I'm a good worker. You said so yourself. These young kids, what do they know? Here one day and gone the next. Not me. I'm not going. You can't make me go. I'll talk to the President. He knows you can't run that department without me."

She sighed and sat back down in her chair. "Lillian," she said, "don't make it hard for yourself." She picked up a sheaf of papers and handed it to me. "Here's your retirement computation all made out and signed by the President. He'd like to wish you well himself, but he's out of town this week. Now if you'll just hand in your identification card, I'll give you your final paycheck and you'll be free to pursue a life of leisure."

"Just like that? Out?" I couldn't believe it. "You don't even want me to work today? Out on the street? No place to go? Nothing to do? After I polished my shoes?"

"There'll be a Christmas party for retirees. You'll get an invitation. Now if you'll excuse me, we're getting ready for Labor Day and you know what that means."

"You couldn't let me stay and help out?"

She didn't answer. Now I really wished I had brought a handkerchief. But I held back the tears and we walked back to my counter. I got out my pocketbook, handed her my I.D. card, and she gave me the check and that was that.

I stood there behind the counter for a minute, but then I started feeling funny, like I didn't belong which, of course, I didn't any more. I walked around to the other side of the counter, trying to feel like a customer, but that didn't feel right either. I wanted to say goodbye to the other girls in the department, but I was afraid that if I did I'd really start crying and that wouldn't do any good. So I just drifted away across the floor as if I was only going to the ladies room or the cafeteria for a cup of coffee.

That was the way to do it—a little bit at a time. I walked around

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the floor, through Sleepwear and Daywear and Robes, and I saw a lot of familiar faces behind the counters getting ready for business. But I might have been invisible for all the notice they took of me. I guess the word had got around.

By the time I got to the escalators, customers were beginning to spread through the store, so I just went along following this group or that group. All morning I wandered through the store, up and down the escalators, visiting all my favorite departments. But I didn't buy anything and I didn't speak to a soul. At lunchtime I ran out to the bank and cashed my check. I couldn't eat in the employees' cafeteria any more, but I did the next best thing. I ate in the restaurant on the fifth floor.

In the afternoon I spent a lot of time looking at things that Kathy and Timmy would like. And then I went to Home Furnishings and thought about how I would like my new apartment to look. I stayed there until quitting time.

After I got off the subway, I stopped at Waldbaum's. I bought a barbecued chicken, some cottage cheese, a head of lettuce, and two tomatoes. The street was full of people going in and out of shops and hurrying home from work. I was hurrying home from work, too, but not so fast that I didn't notice her. She was in her usual corner by the bank, staring and smirking at the people going by. I stopped, and for the first time I looked right at her. She didn't like that. She shook her fist at me and growled some words I couldn't understand.

I said, "Do you want something to eat?"

I didn't wait for her to answer. I think she was as surprised as I was that I had spoken to her. I pulled the barbecued chicken out of the bag and stooped to lay it in her lap. Getting that close to her was a revelation. She smelled. Well, of course, she did, poor thing. There aren't any bathtubs on street corners. Then I went home.

The moving truck was gone, and that meant Grace was gone. There really wasn't anyone else in the building I was on friendly terms with. No mail in the mailbox. Who was there to write to me except once in a while Ellen and once a month Con Edison? The building already seemed deserted. My footsteps made a hollow sound in the lobby and the elevator groaned like it had rheumatism. I wondered how many besides Grace had already moved out. Maybe I was the only one left.

I made a little cottage-cheese salad for my supper and went to bed as soon as I had washed my plate and one fork. Ellen was right about one thing, I wasn't getting any younger. My black shoes were

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good and strong and had low heels, but even so, my feet hurt and my legs ached clear up to my knees from standing up and walking around all day. I fell asleep thinking about the Labor Day sales and how busy we would be at the store.

In the morning I got up and took a shower just like always, put on my black dress and my black shoes that still had a good shine to them, and got ready to go to the store. I always put on a little makeup, not a lot because an old lady with a face full of makeup looks like death warmed over, but just enough to show I cared about my appearance. This morning I took a good hard look at myself. I had gray hair, and so did she. Blue eyes, both of us. My skin, wrinkles and all, was pale and soft with only a few age spots, while hers was coarse and red. Otherwise, we might have been sisters. I wondered if she'd eaten the chicken.

When I left the building, a man was hauling in the garbage cans. He wasn't the regular super, but I stopped to talk to him anyway.

"Where's Victor? Is he sick?"

"Who?"

"Victor. The super."

"Gone. All the supers gone. The whole block. They fired all the supers. Me, I just come around and do the garbage cans. But not for long. Another week or two, then no more. You got garbage, you gotta get rid of it yourself. Better you should get out, lady. You got a place to go, go. It ain't safe around here no more. Last night they broke in next door and cleaned out the empty apartments. Light fixtures, toilets, it's a wonder they don't take the wallpaper off the walls. Damn ripoff artists!"

He sent the garbage cans crashing down into the areaway as if they were the thieves in question. I walked away toward the subway. I certainly didn't want to be late today, not with Labor Day coming up next weekend. A place to go. I always had a place to go. The store was my place. I would always be safe there.

When I got to the corner by the bank, she was standing up. I think she was waiting for me. I had never seen her on her feet before, and I was surprised to see how tall she was. Somehow I'd always thought of her as bent and stunted, a dwarf, but she was at least as tall as I am, maybe an inch or two taller.

"Wait," she croaked. She rummaged in her shopping cart and came up with a bright yellow bundle. "Take it."

"No," I said. Even though it was a summer morning and already hot and sticky, I felt a chill.

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"Take it," she growled, and shoved it into my hands.

I shook it out. It was one of her sweaters, a yellow orlon cardigan, wrinkled and raveling, with buttons missing.

"Put it on."

She looked so fierce that I didn't want to risk making her angry with me. I put it on. The surprising thing was that my flesh didn't crawl from contact with the filthy thing. Instead, I felt a kind of warmth spreading all through my shaking body.

"Nice," she said. "You keep it."

I said, "Thank you. I have to go now." And I went on to the subway.

The guard wouldn't let me go in the employees' entrance. I had to go around to the front and wait for the store to open. That was the first thing. The second thing was that after I'd been in the store for about an hour I noticed one of the store detectives following me. I knew her, a nice girl who'd helped me out several times when ladies would try to put on two or three girdles and walk out.

I stopped and said, "Why are you following me?"

"I'm not following you," she said.

"Yes, you are. Do you think I'm going to steal something?"

"No," she said. "Look, Mrs. Curry, why don't you go home. They're afraid you might do something crazy. They saw you walking around yesterday and we all have orders to watch out for you."

"Do I look crazy?" I asked her.

"No," she said, but her voice wavered and I could see her taking in the yellow sweater. Then I realized that I'd forgotten to put on any makeup that morning and maybe I hadn't even combed my hair.

"Okay," I said. I wasn't going to wait around for a third thing to happen, and I could see Miss Kramer sailing across the floor with a hard look on her face. I got on the down escalator.

It was strange getting on the subway in the middle of the day. No crowds, I even got a seat. I noticed that people avoided sitting next to me. The yellow sweater was like some kind of magical cloak that made a little wall of privacy between me and everyone else. I thought that over all the way home, that and the fact that the store really wasn't my place any more and I would have to find some place that was mine.

When I got to the corner near the bank there she was. Some kids were teasing her, bouncing a ball off the wall and making it go as close to her as they could without actually hitting her. She crouched

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in her corner with her eyes closed, trying to ignore them, but her lips were moving a mile a minute and she sure wasn't saying her prayers. I felt sorry for her and at the same time glad, because for some reason when I stopped at Waldbaum's I had picked up double what I needed for my dinner. Two little steaks instead of one, not sirloin or anything like that. Just minute steaks, but they taste okay if you put some steak sauce on them. Two nice potatoes to bake in the oven and some frozen peas. I guess I was thinking that I could eat one steak today and one tomorrow, but now I thought, "Why not have some company? Mrs. Finney is gone and there's nobody to talk to, and maybe this one could do with a decent meal. It would be my good deed for the day."

I shooed the kids away. They went, but not before they called me some names I'd never heard before and I thought I had heard everything. When I turned back to look at her, she was looking at me. And smiling. At least, I think it was a smile, but it was hard to tell because one side of her mouth went up and the other side went down and there were a couple of teeth missing in the middle. But she seemed friendly enough.

I said, "Hi. Was the chicken okay?"

She growled something and started rummaging in one of her boxes. What she pulled out was a plastic bag, the kind that hot-dog buns come in, and she handed it to me still growling and smiling and getting very excited. I looked in the plastic bag. It was full of chicken bones, big ones and little ones, all the meat chewed off clean as a whistle. I guess she was saying thank you and wanted me to know that she had really polished off that chicken.

"Well," I said, "that's nice."

I didn't know what to do with the chicken bones. I didn't want to put them in the trash barrel on the corner right in front of her eyes, just in case she meant them as a present for me and I would hurt her feelings. So I put them in my Waldbaum's shopping bag. Her smile got even bigger, and she started nodding and making gobbling noises and pointing at my shopping bag. I got the idea.

"You want something else to eat?"

Oh, boy! Talk about hitting the jackpot! Her eyes got bright and nearly bugged out of her head, and spit started drooling down the corners of her mouth.

"Well, okay," I said, "but you'll have to come home with me so I can cook it."

That stopped her. She closed her eyes, sank back into her corner,

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and pulled her coat collar up around her ears.

"Suit yourself," I said. She was acting like a little kid, so I'd just have to treat her like one. "Come or don't come. It's up to you. I'm going now."

I crossed the street, but I hadn't got more than half a block away before I heard the shopping cart rattling and bumping along behind me. And that's the way we went home, me walking along in front pretending I didn't know she was following, and her pushing her shopping cart loaded up with everything she owned, which was junk.

When we got inside the lobby of my building, I kept on pretending she wasn't there, and when the elevator came I got on it and so did she without saying a word. But when we finally got inside my apartment I couldn't keep it up any more.

"Well, here we are," I said.

She didn't say anything, but she started looking around and picking things up and putting them down. I didn't mind because it was all going to have to go anyway, and if she broke something what did it matter because it was all just as much junk as what she had in her shopping cart. Which was parked just inside the door.

"I'm going to cook now," I said. "The bathroom's over there if you want to wash up."

So I went in the kitchen and did what I had to do. Potatoes in the oven, set the table, get out the frying pan. I had some sherry left over from Christmas. I'm not much of a drinking person, but every once in a while I liked to have a glass or two with Mrs. Finney. Might as well get rid of it, I thought. So I went into the living room to ask if she'd like some. She wasn't there. I thought maybe she got nervous and left. Nothing to be nervous about. But then I saw the shopping cart still there, and not only that, but she had put my pair of china robins that I'd won at the bingo at church years ago right on top of the heap of stuff in the cart.

"Well, that's okay," I said to myself, "if it makes her happy. It all has to go and it might as well go that way."

She came out of the bathroom and her face was about ten degrees cleaner, although the rest of her still didn't smell too good.

"Want some sherry?" I asked her.

She smiled that crazy crooked smile and croaked out a word that sounded like "Yes."

So back in the kitchen I went and got out some glasses and the bottle, and while I was doing that I got so angry because a couple

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of roaches crawled out of the breadbox.

"Dammit!" I said, although I hardly ever swear, and I quick got the roach powder out from under the sink. Boy, did I let them have it! I buried them in it. And I watched them curl up and tip over on their backs with their legs waving in the air. And then I poured the sherry. I had to stir hers around a lot because the way it is with oil and vinegar, it's the same with sherry and roach powder.

It wasn't that I thought she was a roach or something horrible. She was really kind of nice to have around. She didn't talk too much, and she had a sense of obligation which she showed by giving me her yellow sweater. The only thing was, there wouldn't be room for the two of us in the corner by the bank, and I didn't want to leave the old neighborhood, not even to go to Queens where Grace Finney was.

Well, she drank her sherry up right away, in one gulp, and held out her glass for more. So I went back in the kitchen to get her some more. And then some more. Pretty soon the bottle was empty. So was the roach-powder box.

I threw them both in the garbage and checked on the potatoes baking in the oven. They weren't done yet. I went back in the living room and she was sort of toppled over on the couch kind of snoring and blowing bubbles out of the side of her mouth.

I said, "If you're tired, why don't you come and lie down?"

I pulled her up and made her get off the couch. It wasn't easy, what with her being almost a dead weight and the smell and all. But I took her in my bedroom and let her flop down on my bed. She looked at me once, and I think she looked kind of happy. She gave a little growl and closed her eyes and that was that.

The potatoes still weren't done, so I decided the least I could do was make her look halfway decent. I took her shoes off. She was wearing an old pair of sneakers with holes at the toes, tied with string. No socks. Her ankles were crusty with dirt. I got a basin of hot water and soap and towels and a scrub brush. It was hard work, getting all those clothes off her and cleaning her up. And it was sad how thin she was underneath everything. I washed her like a baby and when I got finished she was as clean and fresh as a baby. I even washed her hair. And then I dressed her in one of my own flannel nightgowns and straightened her out on the bed and covered her up. She looked like she was sleeping, so I tiptoed out of the room.

Boy, was I hungry! By then the potatoes were done, so I put both steaks in the frying pan and boiled up the water for the peas. And

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believe it or not I ate everything. Every bite. Then I cleaned up the kitchen, because you never can tell. I wouldn't want to go off and leave a mess behind for someone else to see. I'd been thinking about it all, you see, and what I thought was this. She had a place in the world and now she didn't need it any more. I had no place in the world and I needed one. Now I would take her place, and she could have my old place, which was no place.

And what would happen when they find her? Who can tell the difference between one old lady and another? Who cares? They'll write to Ellen and tell her, "We found your mother." Maybe she'd come, maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she'd cry a little, and have the body shipped out there to be buried. I don't want to be buried out there, dead or alive. If she comes here and says, "That's not my mother," they'll say, "Then who is she? We found her in your mother's apartment." But she won't come. Anyway, maybe they'll never find her. If I know them, they'll just tear the building down and cart the rubble off to New Jersey, her included.

And all the time I'll be laughing. I'll be there in my corner. She'll be there. We'll be there. I never knew her name. That's all right, though. We'll have a new name. Or no name. Who needs a name? I have this nice shopping cart and a place to go to.

She's always there, crouching down in the little covered-over space next to the bank on the corner. Rain or shine, winter or summer, she's there watching the people go by. It's not a bad life, and you learn a lot about human nature. It's amazing, the good stuff that people throw away. If it gets cold, there are places to go to keep warm, but after a while you get so you don't feel the cold. One thing, though. I always keep my shoes polished.

"Q"

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a NERO WOLFE short novel by

REX STOUT

complete in this issue

It had to be one of three women—either the nurse or the secretary or the housekeeper; and it was either an innocent matter in which one of them had been lucky enough to hook Huck, or it was a very serious matter in which one of them had committed a murder.

Now, was Archie Goodwin "a holy terror as a sleuth" or not? Judge for yourself: it was a case in which for the third time, or possibly the fourth, Archie made Nero speechless . . .

INVITATION TO MURDER

by REX STOUT

The neat little man resented it. He was hurt. "No, sir," he protested, "you are wrong. It is not what you called it, sordid familial flimflam. It is perfectly legitimate for me to inquire into anything affecting the disposal of the fortune my father made, is it not?"

Weighing rather less than half as much as Nero Wolfe, he was lost in the red leather chair three steps from the end of Wolfe's desk. Comfortably filling his own outsized chair behind the desk, Wolfe was scowling at the would-be client, Mr. Herman Lewent of New York and Paris. I, at my desk with notebook and pen, was neutral, because it was Friday and I had a weekend date, and if Lewent's job was urgent and we took it, goodbye weekend.

Wolfe, as usual when solicited, was torn. He hated to work, but he loved to eat and drink, and his domestic and professional establishment in the old brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street, including the orchids in the plant rooms on the roof, had an awful appetite for dollars. The only source of dollars was his income as a private detective, and at that moment, there on his desk near the

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edge, was a little stack of lettuce with a rubber band around it. Herman Lewent, who had put it there, had stated that it amounted to $1000.

Nevertheless, Wolfe, who hated to work and was torn, demanded, "Why is it legitimate?"

Lewent was small all over. He was slim and short, his hands and feet were tiny, and his features were in scale, with a pinched little mouth that had no room at all for lips. Also he was old enough to have started to shrink some and show creases. Still I would not have called him a squirt. When his quick little gray eyes met yours straight, as they did, you had the feeling that he knew a lot of the answers and could supply good guesses on the ones he hadn't worked out.

He was still resenting Wolfe but holding it in. "I came to you," he said, "because this is a very delicate matter, and the combination you have here, you and Mr. Goodwin, may be able to handle it. So I'm prepared to suffer your rudeness. The inquiry is legitimate because it was my father who made the fortune–in mining, mostly copper mining. My mother died when I was a child, and I never learned how to behave myself. I have never learned, and I am now too old to. A few months ago I had three mistresses, one in Paris, one in Toulouse, and one in Rome, and one of them tried to poison me."

I gave him an eye and decided to believe nothing he said. He just wasn't built for it.

He was proceeding. "I am no longer wild; I'm too old; but I was wild when young. Though my father didn't approve of me and finally refused to see me, he didn't let me starve–in fact, he was fairly generous. But when he died–I was thirty-six then; that was twenty years ago–he left everything to my sister, Beryl, with a request that she consider my needs. She did so, up to a point, until she died a year ago. She was born knowing how to behave, my sister was. I was abroad when she died–I have lived mostly abroad–but of course I flew over for the funeral."

He shrugged like a Frenchman, or anyhow not like an American. "Out of all the millions she had inherited from our father, she left me nothing. Not a cent, not a sou. It all went to her husband, Theodore Huck, with a request that he consider my needs, worded exactly like the request in my father's will. As I said, my sister knew how to behave. I had a talk with Huck and suggested that it would be simpler to transfer a lump sum to me–say a million or

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even half a million–but he thought not. He said he knew what Beryl's wishes were and felt bound to carry them out, and he agreed to send me the same amount she had been sending the last two years, a thousand dollars a month. I didn't do what I should have done."

He wanted a question, and Wolfe obliged. "What should you have done?"

"I should have killed him. He sat there in his wheelchair–his arteries have gone bad, and he can't walk–he sat there in my father's house, the owner of it, and he said he would send me a thousand a month from the money my father had made. It was an invitation to murder. If I had killed him, with due precaution of course, under my sister's will I would have received for the rest of my life an annual income of some forty thousand dollars. The idea did occur to me, but I'm no good at all with any kind of intricacy, and though I have never learned how to behave, my instinct of self-preservation is damned keen."

He gestured. "That's what brought me here, that instinct. If for any reason this creature, this brother-in-law, this Theodore Huck in a wheelchair, stopped considering my needs, I would shortly die of starvation. I am incapable of sustaining life, even my own–especially my own. So when, at my rooms in Paris, I received a communication warning me of possible danger, I took a plane to New York. My brother-in-law made me welcome at my father's house–damned gracious of him–and I've been there nearly two weeks now, and I'm stumped, and that's why I'm here. There are three–"

He stopped abruptly, aimed the quick little gray eyes at me, sent them back to Wolfe, and said, "This is confidential."

Wolfe nodded. "Things discussed in this room usually are. Your risk, sir."

"Well." He screwed his pinched little mouth, making it even smaller. He shrugged. "Well. I think the warning I got was valid. There are three women in that house with him, besides the cook and maids: the housekeeper, Mrs. Cassie O'Shea, who is a widow; a nurse, Miss Sylvia Marcy; and a so-called secretary, Miss Dorothy Riff. They're all after him, and I think one of them is getting him, but I don't know which one and I can't find out. The trouble is, I have developed a formula for getting on terms with women, but in this case I can't use it and I'm lost. I need to know as soon as possible which one of those women is landing my brother-in-law."

Wolfe snorted. "So you can intervene? With your formula?"

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"Good God, no." Lewent was shocked. "It would be a damned nuisance, and anyway there would soon be another one and I would have time for nothing else. Also I would like to get back to Europe before the holidays. I merely want to engage her sympathetic interest. I want to secure her friendship. I want to make absolutely certain that she will be permanently well disposed toward me after she lands Huck. That will take me three weeks if it is Miss Marcy or Miss Riff, four if it is Mrs. O'Shea. It is not a sordid familial flimflam. It's a perfectly legitimate inquiry. Isn't it?"

"I suppose so," Wolfe conceded. "But it's fantastic."

"Not at all. It's practical and damned sensible. My income for the rest of my life depends entirely on the goodwill of my brother-in-law. If he marries, especially if he marries a woman considerably younger than he is, how long will his goodwill last–twelve thousand dollars' worth, year after year–if his wife hasn't got it too?"

Wolfe grunted. "What precisely would be my engagement?"

"To find out as soon as possible which one of them is hooking him." Lewent aimed a thumb at the little stack he had put on Wolfe's desk. "That thousand dollars is yours, succeed or fail, but it will have to cover everything because it's all I can afford. It might seem hardly worth your while, but actually, since you never leave this house on business, it will take little of your time and talent. The work will be done by Mr. Goodwin, and you have to pay his salary anyhow, and the expense will be negligible–taxi fares to and from my father's house on Sixty-ninth Street, now owned by Theodore Huck. I know something of Goodwin's record and prowess, and one trip, one day, might be all he would require–with consultation with you, of course. He can go up there with me now."

I didn't throw him a kiss. I can take a compliment raw, with no chaser, as well as the next one, but I hope I have learned how to behave, and I had a weekend date.

Wolfe's scowl had deteriorated to a mild frown. "You say you received a warning. From whom?"

"From Paul Thayer, Huck's nephew. Huck lets him live there in the house. He's as useless as I am–he composes music that no one will listen to. He hopes to inherit some of my father's money from Huck, and he got alarmed and wrote me."

"What alarmed him?"

"Some little things and one big thing. A man with cases came from Tiffany's and was with Huck in his study for nearly an hour. That could mean only one thing: Huck was buying something ex-

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pensive for a woman–one of those three."

"Why? There are other women."

Lewent shook his head. "Not for Huck. He can't walk, and he hasn't been out of the house more than two or three times since my sister died. No woman ever comes to see him. It's one of those three. You might think Paul or I could discover which one, but it's not so simple. He has his meals in his room or his study, and we see very little of him. Paul has tried approaching the women on it, and I have made a few little efforts in that direction myself, but it's a delicate business."

"Make friends with all three of them."

"It couldn't be done. They're too jealous of one another."

"Wait until you see one of them wearing the gift from Tiffany's. That will settle it."

"It would settle me too. It would be too damned obvious. None of them is a numskull."

"But," Wolfe objected, "it will be equally obvious if she is flushed by Mr. Goodwin–in consultation with me."

"I don't expect him to flush her. I don't want him to." Lewent slid forward on the smooth leather seat. "My God, can't you find out things without people knowing it? I couldn't take Goodwin into that house to cross-examine them about their relations with Huck, even if I wanted to. It is my father's house, but Huck owns it. We'll have to use a subterfuge, especially for Goodwin to talk with Huck. I just decided–"

He was stopped by a noise from Wolfe–an explosive noise, half grunt and half snort. It was meant for a stopper. Lewent's quick little gray eyes widened in startled inquiry. "What's the matter?"

"You." Wolfe was mildly disgusted. "I might conceivably engage to pry into the amatory designs of a wealthy widower if I were hard put and the bait was spectacular, but as it is you're wasting your time. And mine. Good day, sir."

It sounded positively final. Lewent's pinched little mouth worked from side to side and up and down. "You mean you won't do it."

"That's right."

"I didn't think you would, but I thought I'd try it that way." He clasped his hands together. "So here goes. Now this is confidential."

"You said that before."

"I know I did, but this is different. My sister died here in New York, at my father's house, of ptomaine poisoning from something she ate. Huck cabled me in Paris, and I flew home for the funeral,

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as I said. I never had any suspicions about it until two things happened. First, Odelette, my mistress in Toulouse, tried to poison me when she was mad with jealousy, showing me that anyone may commit murder if the motive is good enough; and second, I was warned by Paul Thayer that Huck was being bagged by one of these women. That started me thinking, and I went to a library and read up on ptomaines. Those women were all present when my sister was poisoned. I believe that one of them murdered her."

"On what evidence?"

"None. I believe that she already had Huck or was sure she could get him. I've been here nearly two weeks, and I firmly believe that, but what can I do? I don't even dare ask any questions of anyone. Of course the police would laugh at me. Naturally I thought of you, but the most I could scrape up was a thousand dollars, and that's small change for you, so I decided to try to get you started on it by not mentioning murder and just saying what I wanted–well, you heard me."

He gestured. "I want to head her off, and I think maybe I can if I can find out which one it is."

"How will you head her off without evidence?"

"That's up to me. Leave that to me, if once I know her. For an absolutely legitimate purpose I want to pay in advance for a thousand dollars' worth of Goodwin's time and talent and consultation with you as required. Ten hours of Goodwin and ten minutes of you? Whatever it is, I want to buy it."

Abruptly Wolfe rolled his chair back and arose. "I have an important phone call to make," he told Lewent, "and will leave you with Mr. Goodwin. Since, as you say, the work will be done by him, I won't be needed, even for the decision whether to take the job."

He marched across to the door to the hall and was gone, but not, as I knew, to make a phone call. Not wanting to refuse to take money, but not caring to shoulder the blame for spoiling my weekend for the sake of a measly grand, he was putting it up to me. As for him, he would go to the kitchen, open a bottle of beer, and make suggestions to Fritz about preparations for lunch. As for me, I was stuck. If I shooed Lewent out it would be months before I could again open my trap to ride Wolfe for turning down jobs. So I got the little stack which the little man had put on Wolfe's desk, counted it, and found that it was twenty fifties.

"Okay," I told him, "I'll give you a receipt. First I think our approach to Huck will stand some discussion. Do you agree?"

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He did, and I sat, and we discussed.

Lewent's father's house of granite, on Sixty-ninth Street between Fifth and Madison, had apparently not had its face washed since little Herman had been born there back in the nineteenth century, but inside there had unquestionably been changes. For one thing, the self-service elevator was so modern and so large that I guessed it had been installed since the present owner had been condemned to a wheelchair on account of his bum arteries.

Though Lewent had insisted that we should delay the operation until Theodore Huck's lunch hour was past, and therefore it was after two o'clock when we arrived and were let in by a female viking who could have carried Herman around in her apron, I was still nursing the hope that I might earn the grand that day and evening and still have my weekend. So when the viqueen had taken our hats I wasted no time for a glance at the luxuries of the big entrance hall as Lewent led the way to the elevator. We left it one flight up and turned right down the hall, which was some narrower but longer than the one downstairs. I was surprised at the thickness of the rugs in a mansion whose master did all his moving in a wheelchair.

The surprise left when we entered a large high-ceilinged room at the rear of the house and I saw the wheelchair. He could have parked it in a trailer camp and lived in it if it had had a roof. The seat was roomy enough for Nero Wolfe. At the sides were shelves, trays, and compartments. A large metal box at the rear, low, was presumably a motor housing. A fluorescent light was attached to the frame at Huck's left, shining on a magazine Huck was reading.

Lewent said, "This is Mr. Goodwin, as I phoned you," and turned and went.

Theodore Huck said nothing. Tossing the magazine on a table nearby, he pressed a button, and the footrest of the chair came up, smoothly, until his legs, which were under a large plaid shawl, were straight and horizontal. He pressed another button, and the chair's back receded until he was half reclining. He pressed another button, and the part his legs were on began to move from side to side, not very gently. He closed his eyes.

I lowered myself onto a chair and did a sweeping take of the room, which was his study, with the parts of the wall left visible by pictures and rows of books showing old wood panels, and then went back to him. The upper half of him was perfectly presentable for a guy his age, with a discernible waistline, good broad shoulders, a face with

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all features in proportion and correctly placed, and his full share of hair that had been dark but was now mostly gray. I had plenty of time to take him in, for he stayed put for a good five minutes, with his legs going from side to side on the moving frame. Finally the motion stopped, he pressed buttons, his legs went down and his torso up, and he reached to pull the edge of the plaid shawl above his hips.

He looked at me, but I couldn't meet him because he seemed to be focusing about a foot below my chin. "I do that sixteen times a day," he said. "Every hour while I'm awake. It helps a little. A year ago I could barely stand, and now I can take five or six steps. Your name's Goodwin?"

"Right."

"My brother-in-law said you wanted to see me."

I nodded. "That's not strictly accurate, but it will do. He wanted me to see you. My name's Archie Goodwin, and I work for Nero Wolfe, the detective, and your–"

"Oh! You're that Goodwin?"

"Right. Your brother-in-law called at Mr. Wolfe's office today and wanted to engage his services. He says that his sister–"

A door off to the right opened, and a young woman my age came stepping in, with papers in her hands. She was fair, with gray-green eyes, and as a spectacle there wasn't a thing wrong with her, at a glance. Halfway across to the wheelchair she stopped and inquired, "Will you sign the letters now, Mr. Huck?"

"Later, Miss Riff." He was a little crisp. "Later will do."

"You said–I thought perhaps–"

"There's no hurry."

"Very well. I'm sorry if I interrupted."

She turned and was gone, closing the door behind her so gently that there was no noise at all. I asked Huck, "That was Dorothy Riff?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I was telling you. Mr. Lewent says his sister promised him that in case of her death he would get a substantial sum. That was about a year before she died, and he is certain she would not have failed to arrange to keep her promise."

Huck was shaking his head. "He heard her will read, and he saw it."

"He says she told him she wouldn't put it in her will because that would have violated a promise she had made her father. He thinks

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she left it in someone's care for him–not you, he says, for you would have followed her instructions fully and promptly. He suspects it was Miss Riff or Miss Marcy or Mrs. O'Shea, and he wants Mr. Wolfe to investigate the matter, but he says it can be investigated only with your knowledge and consent, and that's why he asked you to see me. Also Mr. Wolfe thought–"

Another door swung open, this time the one by which Lewent and I had entered from the hall, and another female was with us. On a guess she was somewhat younger than Dorothy Riff, but it was hard to tell with her nurse's uniform setting off her big dark eyes and dark brown hair. Stopping for no questions, she crossed to a cabinet, got out a glass, a thermos carafe, and a bottle of Solway's twenty-year liqueur striped-label Scotch; put an ounce from the bottle and two ounces from the carafe into the glass, no ice; and handed it to Huck and got thanked.

She asked him in a low cooing voice, "Everything under control?"

"Fine."

"Your two-thirty exercise?"

"Of course."

She left us, having given me just one swift glance. When the door was closed again Huck spoke. "This is medicine for me every two hours, but will you have some?"

"No, thanks. That was Sylvia Marcy?"

"Yes. You were saying that Mr. Wolfe thought–"

I resumed. "He thought that before I talk with the three women–with your permission, of course–you might be willing to let us have your opinion on a few points. For instance, do you think it likely that your wife made some such arrangement as Mr. Lewent suspects? Can you recall ever hearing her say anything hinting at such a thing? Her accounts for the months before she died–say a year–do they show a withdrawal of any unusual amount, either cash or securities? And most important, Mr. Wolfe thinks, which of those three women would your wife have been most likely to choose for such a purpose?"

Huck may have thought he was looking straight at me, but if so his aim was still low. "My brother-in-law has never mentioned this to me," he said stiffly.

I nodded. "He says he was afraid of offending you. But now, since a year has passed and it is evident that all you have for him is the request in your wife's will that his needs be considered, he feels that the matter should be looked into, so far as it can be without any

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inconvenience or embarrassment to you."

"How could it embarrass me?"

"I don't know. You're a very wealthy man, and Miss Riff and Miss Marcy and Mrs. O'Shea work for you and live in your house, and I suppose Mr. Lewent thought you might not like my asking them an assortment of leading questions."

"Miss Riff doesn't live here."

"The other two do?"

"Yes."

"Do you regard them all as upright and trustworthy?"

"Yes."

"This might help. Are you yourself so certain of the character of any one of them that you would eliminate her entirely from consideration in a matter of this kind?"

He twisted and stretched an arm to put his medicine glass on the table, and, turning back to me, was opening his mouth to reply when the door to the hall opened again and we had another visitor. This time I wasn't sure. There had been no question about the secretary or nurse the moment they appeared, but I had not expected to see the housekeeper in a gay figured dress, white and two shades of blue. Also, though she was a little farther along than the other two, she was by no means a crone. She had medium brown hair and deep blue eyes, and there was a faint touch of hip-swinging in her walk. She came as for a purpose, straight to the front of the wheelchair, bent over from the hips, and tucked in the edge of the shawl around Huck's feet. I watched Huck's eyes. They went to her, naturally, but they seemed more preoccupied than pleased.

She straightened up and spoke. "All right, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. O'Shea."

"Any orders?"

"No, nothing."

She wheeled a quarter-turn to face me, and did a take. Her look was too brief to be called deliberate, but there sure was nothing furtive about it. I thought I might as well let her have a grin, but before my muscles reacted to deliver it she was through and was on her way. From the rear the hip-swing was more perceptible than from the front. As I viewed it I reflected that they had certainly wasted no time in giving a stranger a once-over. Entering and ascending with Lewent, I had had sight, sound, or smell of none of them, but now all three had galloped in before I had been with Huck more than fifteen minutes. If they were too jealous for a mutual

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intelligence pact it must have been radar.

When the door was shut again Huck spoke. "You asked some questions. I think it very unlikely that my wife made any such arrangement as you describe. She certainly never hinted at it to me. As far as I know, during the last year of her life she made no withdrawal of cash or securities not accounted for, but I'll be glad to tell the accountants to check it. Although I do not accuse my brother-in-law of fabrication, I strongly suspect that he grossly misunderstood something my wife said to him. However, since he has consulted Nero Wolfe and you are here, I'm willing to humor him, the poor devil. Do you want to see them separately or together?"

"Together for a start."

"How long will it take? You'll finish today?"

"I hope to. I want to, but I don't know."

He regarded me, started to say something, decided not to, and pressed a button. Instantly the shebang leaped forward like a bronco out of a chute, missing my feet by maybe eight inches with one of its big balloon tires as it swept by. Huck was steering with a lever. Stopping beside the door to the hall, he reached for the knob and pulled the door wide, and the chair circled and passed through. I was on my feet and following when his bellow came.

"Herman! Come down here!"

I know now what had put the whole household on the alert–Paul Thayer, Huck's nephew, had let it out that I was Nero Wolfe's Archie Goodwin–but I didn't know then, and it was a little spectacular to see them coming at us from all directions–Dorothy Riff from a door on that floor, Mrs. O'Shea up the stairs from below, and Lewent and Sylvia Marcy down the stairs from above–none of them bothering with the elevator. They stopped flurrying when they saw Huck sitting composed in his chair and me standing beside him at graceful ease, and approached in no apparent agitation.

Lewent standing was exactly the same height as Huck sitting. He asked as he came, "You want me, Theodore?"

The girls were closing in.

"Yes, I do," Huck told his brother-in-law. "Mr. Goodwin has described the situation to me, and I want you to hear what I say to Mrs. O'Shea and Miss Marcy and Miss Riff." His eyes moved to his womenfolk. "I suppose you have heard of a private detective named Nero Wolfe. Mr. Lewent went to see him this morning and engaged him to investigate something, and he has sent Mr. Goodwin here to make inquiries. Mr. Goodwin wishes to question you three ladies.

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You will answer at your discretion, as you please and think proper. That's all I have to say. I want to make it clear that I am imposing no restriction on what Mr. Goodwin asks or what you answer, but I also wish you to understand that this is a private inquiry instigated by Mr. Lewent, and you are free to judge for yourselves what is fitting and relevant."

I didn't care for it a bit. You might have thought he knew what I was there for and was making damn sure I wouldn't get it. Not by a flicker of an eyelash had he given any ground for a decent guess as to which one had him hooked.

They took me up in the elevator, two flights, to a room they called the sewing room. The name must have been a carry-over from bygone days, as there was no sign of sewing equipment or supplies in sight. Mrs. O'Shea was going to seat us around a table, but I wanted it more informal and got it staged with her and me in easy chairs facing a couch on which the other two were comfortable against cushions.

They were good listeners all right. I took my time about getting to the point, since there was no question about having my audience. I told of Lewent's coming to Wolfe's office. I touched upon his childhood and young manhood, with no mother, not making it actually maudlin. I admitted he had been irresponsible. I told of his having been left out of his father's will. Miss Riff's gray-green eyes, and Miss Marcy's dark eyes, and Mrs. O'Shea's deep blue ones, all concentrated on me, were pleasantly stimulating and made me rather eloquent but not fancy.

I told of the promise Lewent's sister had made him a year before her death–which was, of course, pure invention–of his conviction that she had kept it, and his suspicion that a substantial sum in cash or securities had been entrusted by her to someone to be given to him. I added that he thought it possible that the trustee was one of the women there present, and would they mind answering a few questions?

Mrs. O'Shea stated that Lewent was a frightful little shrimp. Miss Marcy said it was utterly ridiculous. Miss Riff, with her nose turned up, asked, "Why a few questions? You can ask us one, did Mrs. Huck give any of us anything to give to her brother, and we say no, and that settles it."

"It does for you," I conceded. "But as Mr. Huck told you, I'm here to investigate, and that's no way to do it. For instance, what if I

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were investigating something really tough, like a suspicion of murder? What if Lewent suspected that one of you poisoned his sister so you could marry Huck?"

"That's more like it," Miss Marcy said approvingly, with the coo still in her voice.

"Yeah. But then what? I ask if you did it, and you say no, and that settles it? Hardly. I ask plenty, about your relations with Mr. and Mrs. Huck and one another, and about your movements and what you saw and heard, not only the day she died, but a week, a month, a year. You can answer or refuse to answer. If you answer, I check you. If you refuse, I check you double."

"Ask me something," Miss Marcy offered.

"To be suspected of murder," Miss Riff declared, "would at least be exciting. But a thing like this, and from Herman Lewent–" She shivered elegantly. "No, really."

"Okay." I was sociable. "But don't think I'm not going to grill you, because that's what I came for. First, though, I'd like to have your reaction to a little idea of my own. It seems to me that if Mrs. Huck wanted to leave something for her brother like that, the logical person for her to leave it with would have been her husband. Lewent is sure she didn't, because he says Huck is an honest man and would have turned it over. Which may satisfy Lewent, but not me. Huck could be entirely too honest. He could figure that in leaving a gob of dough for her brother his wife was ignoring her father's wishes, and that was wrong, and he wouldn't go through with it. I think that's quite possible, but you ladies know him better than I do. What kind of man is he? Do you think he might do that?"

No reply. Nor was there any exchange of glances. I insisted, "What do you think, Mrs. O'Shea?"

She shook her head, with a corner of her mouth turned up. "That's no kind of question to ask."

"We work for Mr. Huck, you know," Sylvia Marcy cooed.

"He's a very fine man," Dorothy Riff declared. "Very, very fine. That's why one of us poisoned Mrs. Huck so she could marry him. What is she waiting for? It's been a year."

I upturned a palm. "That's only common sense. You have to watch your step on a thing like that, and besides, that might not have been the motive. In fact, here's one I like better: Mrs. Huck handed her a real bundle, say a hundred grand, to be given to Lewent if and when Mrs. Huck died. But as the months went by and Mrs. Huck stayed perfectly healthy, good for another twenty or thirty

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years, our heroine got impatient and acted. Of course she is now in a pickle. She has the hundred grand, but even after a year has passed she doesn't dare to start spending it."

Mrs. O'Shea permitted herself a refined snort. "It wouldn't surprise me if that Lewent creature actually believed that rot." Her tone was chilly, and her deep blue eyes were far from warm. "Mr. Huck said you would ask us questions and we would answer as we please and think proper. Go ahead."

I stuck with them for an hour. I have had chores that were far more disagreeable, but none less fruitful. There were assorted indications that there was no love lost among them, and various hints that Huck was not regarded solely as a source of wages by any of them; but to pick one for Lewent at the end of the hour I would have had to use eeny, meeny, miny, mo. I was disappointed in me.

Deciding that I had made a mistake to bunch them, I arose, thanked them for their patience and cooperation, said that I would like to talk with each of them singly a little later, asked where I would be apt to find Lewent, and was told that his room was on the floor below us, two flights up from the ground and one up from Huck's study. Sylvia Marcy offered to show me and preceded me out and down the stairs. She had cooed throughout. It was a pleasant and even a musical coo, but what the hell. If I had been, like Huck, exposed to it continually, after a couple of days I would either have canned her or sent for a justice of the peace to perform a ceremony.

To my knock Lewent opened the door of his room and invited me in. For the first four paces his room was only a narrow hall, as rooms frequently are in big old houses where bathrooms have been added later, but then it widened to a spacious chamber. He asked me to sit, but I declined, saying I had had a warming-up session with the suspects and would like to meet Paul Thayer, Huck's nephew, if he was available. He said he would see, and left the room, me following, mounted two flights of stairs, which put us on the floor above the sewing room, and went down a hall and knocked on a door. A voice within told us to enter.

The room was comparatively small, and no inch was being wasted. There was a single bed, a grand piano, two small chairs, and a few tons of books and portfolios on shelves and tables and stacked on the floor. Thayer, who was about my age and built like a bull, thought he would bust my knuckles as we shook, and then decided not to when I reacted. I had told Lewent on the way up that it might be better if I had Thayer to myself, and he had agreed, so he left us.

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Thayer flopped on the bed, and I took a chair.

"You sure have bitched it up," he stated.

"Yeah? How?"

He waved a hand. "Do you know anything about music?"

"No."

"Then I won't put it in musical terms. Your idea of busting in with the fantasy of one of them sequestering a bale of kale intended for Lewent is sublimely cuckoo."

"That's a pity. I offered it as a substitute for Lewent's fantasy of one of them poisoning your aunt."

He threw his head back and haw-hawed. He was chockful of gusto. When he could speak he said, "Not my aunt really–yes, I suppose she was, since my Uncle Theodore married her. She died in great pain, and I was strongly affected by it. I couldn't eat properly for weeks. But the idea of one of those gals giving her poison–absolutely, you know, Herman the Midget is an imp of prodigious fancy! Dear God, such witless malice! Nevertheless, I am his staunch ally. He and I are one. Would you like to know how ardently I covet a few of the Lewent millions, now in the grasp of my Uncle Theodore?"

I told him I would love to, but he didn't hear me. He bounced to his feet, strode to the piano bench, sat, held his hands poised above the keyboard with the fingers spread, and tilted his head back with his eyes closed. Suddenly down his hands went, both to his left, and the air was split with a clap of thunder. Other claps and rumblings followed; then his hands started working their way to the right, and there was screeching and squealing. Abruptly it stopped, and he whirled to face me.

"That's how I covet that money. That's how I feel."

"Bad," I said emphatically.

"Don't I know it. Say I had five million. With the income from it I could put a thirty-piece orchestra on the air an hour a week in a dozen key cities, playing the music of the future. I have some of it already written. If you think I'm touched, you're damn right I'm touched! So were Beethoven and Bizet touched, in their day. And the recordings. Dear God, the recordings I'll make! I mean I *would* make. Instead of reveling in that paradise, here I am. I spoke of millions. Would you like to hear the actual facts of my personal financial status?"

He turned and bent his head over the keyboard, and started two fingers of his right hand dancing over the black keys. He kept in one octave and touched so delicately that with my head cocked I

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could barely hear the faint discordant jangle. It set my teeth on edge, and I raised my voice. "I could lend you a buck."

He stopped. "Thanks. I'll let you know. Of course I eat here, so I won't starve. Would you care for a comment from Miss Marcy?"

He used both hands this time, and what came out was no jangle but a very pretty running coo. It was Miss Marcy to a T, with her variations and changes of pace, and he did it without any sign of a tune.

"Check," I said when he stopped. "I'd know her with my eyes shut. Beautiful."

"Thanks. Did Lewent tell you that I'm infatuated with Miss Riff?"

"No. Are you?"

"Oh, yes. If I played that for you, how I feel about Miss Riff, you'd be overcome, though I admit she isn't. That's why I wrote Lewent to come, because I was afraid she was going for my uncle, and I still am, I'm shivering with terror. And now, between you, you and he have bitched it up."

I told him that I disagreed and explained why. For one thing, I said, Lewent felt that getting the three suspects stirred up against him would not handicap him but help him. As soon as we found out which one it was, he was going to start working on her, and he much preferred hostility to indifference as a base to start from. Thayer argued the point, but it was hard to hear him because he kept accompanying himself on the piano, and I requested him to move back to the bed, which he did. After more talk I decided I was wasting my time, since he couldn't furnish even a respectable guess on the question I was supposed to get answered; so I left him and moseyed back downstairs.

On the landing one flight down a maid in uniform with lipstick an inch thick gave me a sidewise glance, and I thought of wrangling her into the sewing room and pumping her, but decided to reserve it. On the floor below that I was tempted. Off to the right was the door to Lewent's room, and the big door straight ahead, which had been widened to admit the wheelchair, as Lewent had informed me, led to Huck's room. I could go and knock on it and, if I got a response, enter and ask him something. If there was no response, I could enter and take a look. A man who has been properly trained can do a lot of looking in five minutes, and it might be something quite simple, like a picture or a note in a drawer between shirts. But I reserved that too and descended another flight.

That was the floor Huck's study was on, but I couldn't use him

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at the moment, and there was no sight or sound of anyone, so I continued my downward journey and was on the ground floor. No one was in sight there either, but a sound came through where a door was standing half open, and I went in. I have a habit of not making an uproar when I move. On a TV screen a man and woman were glaring at each other, with her breathing hard and him saying something. On a chair with her back to me sat Mrs. O'Shea, sipping a liquid from a glass and looking at the TV.

I stepped across to a chair not far from her, sat, and focused on the screen. She knew I was there, certainly, but gave no sign. For some twenty minutes we sat and watched and listened to the story unfold. When it ended and the commercial started she went and turned it off.

"Good reception," I said appreciatively.

She eyed me. "You have your full share of gall, don't you? Did you want to see me?"

"I thought we might have a little private talk."

"Not now. I'll be busy in the kitchen for half an hour."

"Then later. By the way, Mr. Lewent invited me to stay for dinner, but under the circumstances I think I should ask you if it will be inconvenient."

"Mr. Lewent is Mr. Huck's guest, and if he invited you—of course. Mr. Huck eats in his room."

I told her yes, I knew that, and she left. In a moment I followed. Thinking it advisable to let Lewent know that he had invited me to stay for dinner, I went back up two flights of stairs and to his door, and knocked. No result. I knocked louder, and still no result. As I stood there the door of the elevator, ten paces down the hall, slid open, and out came the wheelchair. Huck, seeing me, stopped his vehicle and called, "You still here?"

"Yes, sir. If you don't mind."

"Why should I?"

He touched a button, and off it scooted, to the door of his room. He opened it and rolled through, and the door swung shut. I looked at my wristwatch, lifting it to close range in the dim light; it was two minutes past five. Thinking that Lewent might be taking a nap, I knocked again and, getting no response, I gave it up and went back to the stairs, descended, left the house, walked to Madison and down a block to a drug store, went into a phone booth, and dialed a number.

Wolfe answered. I reported. "No progress. No nothing, except that

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if you get sick I've got a line on a nurse that can coo it out of you. I will not be home to dinner, God help me. I am calling to tell you that and to consult you."

"What about?"

"My brain. It must be leaking or I would never have let myself in for this."

He grunted and hung up. I dialed another number, got Lily Rowan, and told her I had decided I'd rather stay home and do crossword puzzles than keep my weekend date with her. She finally wormed it out of me that I was stuck on a case, if you could call it that, and said she would hold her breath until I rang her again.

Back at the house, admitted by the viqueen, I asked her where Miss Riff was. She didn't know. Miss Marcy? She didn't know. Mr. Lewent? She didn't know. I thanked her warmly and made for the stairs, wondering where the hell the client had got to. Probably sound asleep, and I resented it. On the third floor I knocked good and loud on his door, waited five seconds, turned the knob, and entered.

I darned near walked on him.

He was lying just inside, barely clear of the swing of the door, flat on his back, with one leg bent a little and the other one straight. I closed the door, squatted, unbuttoned his vest, and got a hand inside his shirt. Nothing. His head was at a queer angle. I slipped my fingertips under it, and at the base of the skull, or rather where there should have been a base, there was no resistance to pressure at all. The smashed edge of the skull was halfway up. But I couldn't feel any break in the skin, and there was no blood on my fingers.

I stood up and looked down at him, with my hands shoved in my pants pockets and my jaw set. After enough of that I stepped to where the little hall ended and the room proper began, and sent my eyes around slowly and thoroughly. Then I went and knelt by Lewent's head, with my knees spread, gripped his shoulders, and raised his torso till it was erect. There was nothing under him.

I had a good look at the back of his head, then let him back down as before, got up, took his ankles and lifted his legs, and made sure there was nothing under that half of him. I moved to the door, held my ear to the crack for ten seconds, heard nothing, opened it and slipped through and pulled it shut, headed for the stairs, descended to the ground floor, and, no one appearing, let myself out.

At the drug store on Madison Avenue I got dimes for a half dollar before I went to the phone booth. . .

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When Wolfe heard my voice on the phone he was peevish on principle, since I'm not supposed to disturb him when he is up in the plant rooms, and this was the second time in twenty minutes. I was peevish too, but not on principle.

"Hold it," I told him. "I am about to ask a favor. Twenty minutes ago I reported no progress, but I was wrong. We can't possibly disappoint our client, because he's dead. Murdered."

"Pfui."

"No phooey. I'm telling you–from a booth in a drug store. I found the body, and I want to ask a favor."

"Mr. Lewent is dead?"

"Yes. In order to ask the favor I'll have to lead up to it–not a full report, but the high spots."

"Go ahead."

I did. I gave him no conversations verbatim, but described the cast of characters and the setting, and covered movements and events up to opening the door of Lewent's room. At that point I got particular.

"It would stand some questions," I told him. "The first ten feet inside the door it's not a room at all, merely a passage less than four feet wide. Beyond that is the room proper. The body is in that passage, diagonal, with the feet toward the door. When the door is opened wide its edge comes within ten inches of Lewent's right foot. There's a runner the length of the passage, an Oriental, not fastened down, and it's in place. The body's on it, of course. There is nothing disarranged in either the room or the passage. Everything is just as it was when I was there an hour earlier."

"Except Mr. Lewent." Wolfe's tone was dry and disgusted.

"Yeah. He was hit in the back of the head at the base of the skull with something heavy and hard enough to smash the whole bottom of the skull. The thing was comparatively smooth, because the skin is not broken, only bruised. No blood. I am not a laboratory, but on a bet there was only one blow and it came from beneath, traveling upward. The weapon is not in the passage–"

"Under him."

"No. I lifted him and put him back. Nor is it open to view in the room. Won't that stand some questions?"

"It will indeed. No doubt the police will ask them."

"I'm coming to that. I was not seen entering that room or leaving it. I might as well come on home, or, better still, go and keep my weekend date, if it weren't for one thing–the grand Lewent paid us.

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I've only been here three hours, and I doubt if I've been earning three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents an hour, considering what's happened. Our client may not have been one of nature's top products, but to come here to do a job for him and just fiddle around while someone croaked him and then find his corpse is not my idea of a masterpiece. I don't like it. I won't like the remarks that will occur to Cramer and Stebbins if I phone the cops to say that Mr. Wolfe has had a client murdered while my back was turned and will they please come and take over. Nor will you."

"I won't hear them. Is there an alternative?"

"Yes. That's the favor I'm asking. My feelings are hurt."

"Naturally."

"I resent the assumption that it is perfectly okay to kill a client of yours practically in my presence. I want to ram that assumption down somebody's throat. I had already told Mrs. O'Shea that I am staying for dinner, and I ask your permission to do so. One of those people is stretched good and tight, waiting for the body to be found, and if I'm half as good as I think I am I'll see it or hear it or feel it. Anyhow I want to try."

"How sure are you that you're clear?"

"Completely. For a hair of my head on a rug, or a fingerprint, I was in there before. As for being seen, not a chance. I will mention that if you feel you owe Lewent some return for what he paid us, for which I could cite a couple of precedents, we're more likely to deliver this way than with the cops in command. And of course I can find the body any time I want to if that seems to be called for."

He grunted. "You won't be home to dinner."

I told him no and hung up, and sat a while, getting my mind arranged. The probability of the murderer's giving himself away while under the suspense of waiting for someone to find the body would be reduced to about nine-tenths if any word or look of mine aroused a suspicion that I already knew. Or would it? It might be better.

Finally I left the booth, walked back to the house, rang the bell, and was admitted by the viqueen. She was as stolid as ever, so presumably there had been no discovery while I was out. As I started for the stairs down to the kitchen, intending to find Mrs. O'Shea, my name was called, and I turned to see Dorothy Riff coming through a door.

"I was looking for you," she said.

"I went out to phone Mr. Wolfe. What time do you go home?"

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"I usually leave around six, but today . . ." She fluttered a hand. "I told Mr. Huck I'd stay until you're through." She glanced around. "This isn't very private, is it? Let's go in here."

She led the way into the room where I had watched the TV with Mrs. O'Shea, and through an arch into a larger room where a table toward one end was set with six places. She was telling me, "Since Mrs. Huck died we eat in here mostly, only I'm not often here for dinner. Sit down. We'll have cocktails later, upstairs with Mr. Huck."

We sat, not at the table. She was saying, "I was Mrs. Huck's secretary for four years, and when she died Mr. Huck kept me. He depends on me a lot. I wish you'd tell me something."

"Practically anything," I assured her. "Name it."

"Well–Mr. Huck feels sure that his brother-in-law is trying to blackmail him, and so do I. What do you think?"

Her gray-green eyes were at mine, intent, earnestly wanting to know what I thought. She couldn't possibly have been that free of guile, so I realized she was pretty good. "I'm afraid," I told her, "you'll have to fill in some. Usually a man knows whether he's being blackmailed or not without telling his good-looking secretary to ask a brainy detective what he thinks. Look out or you'll have your fingers in a hard knot and they won't come loose."

She jerked her fingers apart, extended a hand as if to touch me in appeal, and then took it back without reaching me.

"I wish we could talk just like two people," she said hopefully. "I wish I knew how to ask you to help me."

"Nothing could be simpler. Help you what?"

"With Mr. Huck." Her eyes were holding mine. "I said he depends on me, and he always has, but now I don't know. Your coming here like this has made him suspicious. He knows that his nephew, Paul Thayer, is friendly with Mr. Lewent, and he thinks Paul and I are friends, and I think he suspects we are in a plot to blackmail him. He hasn't said so, but I think he does, and you know that isn't true. Why can't you tell me exactly how it stands, exactly what Mr. Lewent is after, and then possibly I can suggest something? I know Mr. Huck so well. I know how his mind works. Whatever it is you're after for Mr. Lewent, I'm sure you wouldn't want to make me lose a good job by getting Mr. Huck suspicious of me. You wouldn't want to do that, would you?"

"I should say not." I was emphatic. "But you said you agree with Huck, you feel sure that Lewent is trying to blackmail him. Since

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Lewent is our client, that hurts me, and I think we ought to clear it up. How about coming with me to ask Lewent and see what he has to say?"

"Now?"

"Right now."

She hesitated a moment, then stood up. "Come on."

In the hall we turned to the stairs instead of the elevator, and began the ascent. By the time we were up one flight, halfway, I had decided how to back out of it and postpone the discovery until I had had a chance to see a few more faces. But I didn't have to do any backing. When we reached the second landing and I turned to her, she had already stopped, and was standing, straight and stiff, her head tilted back a little for her eyes to slant up at me.

"No," she said.

"No what?"

"It wouldn't do any good. I can't! I can't talk with that man." A shiver ran over her. "He gives me the creeps! I don't want you—" She broke off, caught her lower lip with her teeth, turned, and headed along the hall toward the door to Huck's room. She didn't run, but she sure didn't loiter. When she reached the door she knocked, and, without waiting for an invitation, opened, entered, and shut the door.

I moved noiselessly on the thick carpet, got to the wide door, put an ear to the crack, and heard a faint murmur of voices, much too low to catch any words. I stayed put, hoping for more decibels if they got agitated, and was still at the crack when a sound from above warned me. I was standing at the elevator door and had pressed the button by the time feet and shapely calves had come into sight on the stairs.

It was Sylvia Marcy. At the foot, instead of turning toward the next flight down, she turned my way and approached, with the intention, as I thought, of switching on the coo, but I was wrong. She did not merely toss me a glance, she kept her eyes straight at my face as she advanced, and even swiveled her head to prolong it until she was nearly even with me; but she kept right on going and uttered no sound. I could have stuck out a foot and tripped her as she passed. She went to the door to Huck's room, knocked, and entered without waiting. By then the elevator had stopped at my level, and I pulled the door open, stepped in, and pushed the button marked B.

Down in the basement I found the kitchen and walked in. It was

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big and clean and smelled good. An inmate I had not seen before, a plump little woman with extra chins, was at a table peeling mushrooms, and Mrs. O'Shea was across from her, sorting slips of paper.

I spoke as I approached. "I should have told you, Mrs. O'Shea, I doubt if Mr. Lewent will show up for dinner. From what he said when he asked me to stay, I think he feels that under the circumstances it would be better if he were not there."

She went on with the slips a moment before she looked up to reply. "Very well. You were going to talk with me."

"I got sidetracked." I glanced at the cook. "Here?"

"As well here as anywhere."

I parked half of my fundament on the edge of the table. She resumed with the slips of paper, distributing them in piles, and as I watched her arm and hand in quick, deft movement I considered whether they could have struck the blow that killed Lewent, though my mind might easily have been better occupied, since actually a ten-year-old could have done it with the right weapon and the right frame of mind.

"From what you said earlier upstairs," I remarked, "I got the impression that you feel sorry for Mr. Lewent–in a way."

She compressed her lips. "Mr. Lewent is a thoroughly immoral man. And this trouble he's making–he deserves no sympathy from anyone."

"Then my impression was wrong?"

"I didn't say that." She sent the deep blue eyes straight at me, and they were much too cold to show sorrow for anyone or anything whatever. "Frankly, Mr. Goodwin, I am not interested in your impressions. I speak with you at all only because Mr. Huck asked us to."

"And I speak with you, Mrs. O'Shea, only because the man whose father built this house thinks he's been rooked and has hired me to find out. That doesn't interest you either?"

"No." She resumed with the slips of paper.

I eyed her. My trouble with her, as with the rest of them, was that it would take some well-chosen leading questions to jostle her loose, and all the best questions were out of bounds as long as Lewent was supposed to be still breathing.

"Look," I said, "suppose we try this. It's been more than two hours since I talked with you ladies up in the sewing room. Have you discussed the matter with Mr. Lewent? If so, when and where, and what was said?"

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She sent me a sharp sidewise glance. "Ask him."

"I intend to, but I want–"

I got interrupted. A door in the kitchen's far wall was standing open, and through it, rolling almost silently on rubber tires, came a large cabinet of stainless steel. It was more than four feet high, its top reaching almost to the shoulders of Paul Thayer, who was behind it, pushing it. He rolled it across to the neighborhood of Mrs. O'Shea's chair and halted it.

"It's okay," he told her. "Just a bum wire, and I put in a new one. At your service. Invoice follows."

"Thank you, Paul." She had clipped the slips of paper together and was putting them in a drawer. "I'm glad you got it fixed. Mr. Goodwin is staying for dinner, so I suppose you'll bring him up for cocktails. Harriet, don't forget about the capers. Mr. Huck will not have it without the capers."

The plump little woman said she knew it, and Mrs. O'Shea left us, with, I noticed, the hip-swing in action, so it hadn't been a special demonstration for Huck.

I turned to Paul Thayer. "Lewent asked me to stay for dinner but he's going to skip it, so do you think I rate a cocktail?"

"Sure, it's routine." He was matter-of-fact. "It was started by my aunt a couple of years ago when his legs went bad, and he has kept it up. How goes it? Have you spotted her?"

"Not to paste a label on." I aimed a thumb at the cabinet. "What's this, a dishwasher?"

"Hell no, a chow wagon. Designed by my aunt and made to order. Plug it in any outlet."

"It's quite a vehicle." I moved to it. "Mr. Wolfe ought to have one for breakfast in his room. May I take a look?"

"Sure, go ahead. I've got to wash my hands."

He went to the sink and turned on a faucet. I opened the door of the cabinet. There was room enough inside for breakfast for a family, with many grooves for the shelves so that the spaces could be arranged as desired. I slid a couple of them out and in, tapped the walls, and inspected the thermostat.

"Very neat," I said admiringly. "Just what I want for my ninetieth birthday."

"I'll remember and send you one." He was patting his hands with a paper towel.

"Do so." I neared him. "Tell me something. Did Lewent say anything–uh–disagreeable about Miss Riff to you this afternoon?"

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He squinted at me. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm just asking. Did he?"

"No. I haven't seen Lewent this afternoon, not since he brought you up to my room and left us. Now I've answered, why did you ask?"

"Something someone said. Forget it."

"Who said what?"

I shook my head. "Later. If you don't want to forget it, I'll save it for after dinner. We'll be late for cocktails."

He tossed the paper towel at a wastebasket, missed it, growled something, picked it up, dropped it in, told me to come on, and led the way to the elevator.

The provision for drinks in Huck's room, which was large and lush with luxury, was ample and varied. They were on a portable bar near the center of the room, and alongside it was Huck in his wheelchair, freshly shaven, his hair brushed with care, wearing a lemon-colored shirt, a maroon bow tie, and a maroon jacket. Also the plaid woolen shawl that had covered his lower half had been replaced by a maroon quilted one. The room was lit softly but well enough, with lamps around–one of them a rosy silk globe at the end of a metal staff clamped to the frame of Huck's chair. As Thayer and I approached, Huck greeted us.

"Daiquiri as usual, Paul? And you, Mr. Goodwin?"

Having spotted a bottle of Mangan's Irish in the collection, I asked for that. Huck poured it himself, and Sylvia Marcy passed it to me. She had changed from her nurse's uniform to a neat little number, a dress of exactly the same color as Huck's shirt, as well as I could tell in that light; but she hadn't changed her coo. Mrs. O'Shea stood off to one side, sipping something on the rocks, and Dorothy Riff was there by the bar with a half-emptied long one.

With my generous helping of Mangan's, I backed off a little and looked and listened. I have good eyes and ears, and they have had long training under the guidance of Nero Wolfe, but I couldn't see a movement or hear a word or tone that gave the faintest hint that one of them knew a body with a crushed skull was lying only fifty feet away, waiting to be found. They talked and got refills and laughed at a story Huck told. It was a nice little gathering, not hilarious, but absolutely wholesome.

At the end Huck made it more wholesome still. Mrs. O'Shea was starting to leave, and he called to her, and when she rejoined us he leaned over to reach a low rack at the side of his chair. Coming up

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with three little boxes bearing the name of Tiffany, he addressed the females.

"I'm sure you know, you three, that if it weren't for you my life would be miserable, crippled as I am. It is you who make it not merely bearable, but pleasant, really pleasant, and I've been thinking how I can show my appreciation."

He tapped the top box with a finger. "I was going to give these to you next Wednesday, my birthday, but I decided to do it today on account of Mr. Goodwin. His mission here, at the instance of my brother-in-law, is an imputation against you that I feel is utterly unjustified. Mr. Lewent is my wife's brother and so must be humored to the limit of tolerance; he was born in this house, and I will never challenge his right to live here and die here; but I want you to know that I have complete confidence in you, all three of you, and to make that as emphatic as possible I'm making this little presentation in the presence of Mr. Goodwin. Mrs. O'Shea?"

He extended a hand with one of the boxes, and the housekeeper stepped up and took it.

"Miss Riff?"

She took hers.

"Miss Marcy?"

She took hers.

As they got their eyes on their loot there were exclamations and expressions of delight. Sylvia Marcy let out a running broad coo that would have brought tears to my eyes if I hadn't been so busy using them.

"They're good timekeepers too," Huck said, beaming.

Without being too vulgar I managed to get enough of a look to see that the presents were all wristwatches, apparently just alike, and if the red stones were Burma rubies Sylvia's coo was no exaggeration. Paul Thayer, looking flabbergasted, poured rum into his glass and gulped it down. Mrs. O'Shea, her little box clasped tightly in her hand, hustled from the room, and in a moment I heard the faint hum of the elevator. Before long I heard it again, and the wide door of the room opened and Mrs. O'Shea reappeared, pushing the stainless steel portable oven on rubber tires; it was nearly as tall as she was, and much bigger around. Miss Marcy moved the bar away, and Mrs. O'Shea put the portable oven there, beside Huck's chair.

"I'll just serve the soup?" she suggested.

"Now you know," Huck reproached her, "I'd rather do it myself."

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He swung a shelf of the chair around to make a table, and reached to a rack attached to the oven for a napkin.

There was a general movement toward the door, and I joined it. In the hall Thayer and I were in the rear, and he muttered at me, "The damn old goat's got a caliph complex. All three of 'em!"

Going to the stairs to descend, we passed within a few feet of the door to Lewent's room. As far as I could make out, no one gave it a glance.

(continued on page 85)

DETECTIVERSE

JUST DESSERT

by GLORIA ORLICK

There once was a lass named Charlotte La Douce,
Poisoned four husbands with her chocolate mousse.
"Sweets for the sweet," she would cry at dessert,
And thus their wealth to her would divert.
This crime became known as the Charlotte ruse!

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BON APPETIT

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A lone mugger who lurked after dark
Near a man-eating tree in the park
Screamed, "Now what can I do?"
As he vanished from view,
"Its bite is much worse than its bark."

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From readers' reports on "Black Wind": "unusual"—"great tension"—"scary" . . .

BLACK WIND

by BILL PRONZINI

It was one of those freezing late-November nights, just before the winter snows, when a funny east wind comes howling down out of the mountains and across Woodbine Lake a quarter mile from the village. The sound that wind makes is something hellish, full of screams and wailings that can raise the hackles on your neck if you're not used to it. In the old days the Indians who used to live around here called it a "black wind"; they believed that it carried the voices of evil spirits, and that if you listened to it long enough it could drive you mad.

Well, there are a lot of superstitions in our part of upstate New York; nobody pays much mind to them in this modern age. Or if they do, they won't admit it even to themselves. The fact is, though, that when the black wind blows the local folks stay pretty close to home and the village, like as not, is deserted after dusk.

That was the way it was on this night. I hadn't had a customer in my diner in more than an hour, since just before seven o'clock, and I had about decided to close up early and go on home. To a glass of brandy and a good hot fire.

I was pouring myself a last cup of coffee when the headlights swung into the diner's parking lot.

They whipped in fast, off the county highway, and I heard the squeal of brakes on the gravel just out front. Kids, I thought, because that was the way a lot of them drove, even around here–fast and a little reckless. But it wasn't kids. It turned out instead to be a man and a woman in their late thirties, strangers, both of them bundled up in winter coats and mufflers, the woman carrying a big fancy alligator purse.

The wind came in with them, shrieking and swirling. I could feel the numbing chill of it even in the few seconds the door was open; it cuts through you like the blade of a knife, that wind, right straight to the bone.

1979 by Bill Pronzini.

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The man clumped immediately to where I was behind the counter, letting the woman close the door. He was handsome in a suave, barbered city way; but his face was closed up into a mask of controlled rage. His eyes looked like a couple of smoldering embers.

"Coffee," he said. The word came out in a voice that matched his expression–hard and angry, like a threat.

"Sure thing. Two coffees."

"One coffee," he said. "Let her order her own."

The woman had come up on his left, but not close to him–one stool between them. She was nice-looking in the same kind of made-up, city way. Or she would have been if her face wasn't pinched up worse than his; the skin across her cheekbones was stretched so tight it seemed ready to split. Her eyes glistened like a pair of wet stones and didn't blink at all.

"Black coffee," she said to me.

I looked at her, at him, and I started to feel a little uneasy. There was a kind of savage tension between them, thick and crackling; I could feel it like static electricity. I wet my lips, not saying anything, and reached behind me for the coffee pot and two mugs.

The man said, "I'll have a ham-and-cheese sandwich on rye bread. No mustard, no mayonnaise; just butter. Make it to go."

"Yes, sir. How about you, ma'am?"

"Tuna fish on white," she said thinly. She had close-cropped blonde hair, wind-tangled under a loose scarf; she kept brushing at it with an agitated hand. "I'll eat it here."

"No, she won't," the man said to me. "Make it to go, just like mine."

She threw him an ugly look. "I want to eat here."

"Fine," he said–to me again; it was as if she wasn't there. "But I'm leaving in five minutes, as soon as I drink my coffee. I want that ham-and-cheese ready by then."

"Yes, sir."

I finished pouring out the coffee and set the two mugs on the counter. The man took his, swung around, and stomped over to one of the tables. He sat down and stared at the door, blowing into the mug, using it to warm his hands.

"All right," the woman said, "all right, all right. All right." Four times like that, all to herself. Her eyes had cold little lights in them now, like spots of foxfire.

I said hesitantly, "Ma'am? Do you still want the tuna sandwich to eat here?"

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She blinked then, for the first time, and focused on me. "No. To hell with it. I don't want anything to eat." She caught up her mug and took it to another of the tables, two away from the one he was sitting at.

I went down to the sandwich board and got out two pieces of rye bread and spread them with butter. The stillness in there had a strained feel, made almost eerie by the constant wailing outside. I could feel myself getting more jittery as the seconds passed.

While I sliced ham I watched the two of them at the tables–him still staring at the door, drinking his coffee in quick angry sips; her facing the other way, her hands fisted in her lap, the steam from her cup spiraling up around her face. Well-off married couple from New York City, I thought: they were both wearing the same type of expensive wedding ring. On their way to a weekend in the mountains, maybe, or up to Canada for a few days. And they'd had a hell of a fight over something, the way married people do on long tiring drives; that was all there was to it.

Except that that *wasn't* all there was to it.

I've owned this diner 30 years and I've seen a lot of folks come and go in that time; a lot of tourists from the city, with all sorts of marital problems. But I'd never seen any like these two. That tension between them wasn't anything fresh-born, wasn't just the brief and meaningless aftermath of a squabble. No, there was real hatred on both sides–the kind that builds and builds, seething, over long bitter weeks or months or even years. The kind that's liable to explode some day.

Well, it wasn't really any of my business. Not unless the blowup happened in here, it wasn't, and that wasn't likely. Or so I kept telling myself. But I was a little worried just the same. On a night like this, with that damned black wind blowing and playing hell with people's nerves, anything could happen. Anything at all.

I finished making the sandwich, cut it in half, and plastic-bagged it. Just as I slid it into a paper sack, there was a loud banging noise from across the room that made me jump half a foot; it sounded like a pistol shot. But it had only been the man slamming his empty mug down on the table.

I took a breath, let it out silently. He scraped back his chair as I did that, stood up, and jammed his hands into his coat pockets. Without looking at her, he said to the woman, "You pay for the food," and started past her table toward the restrooms in the rear.

She said, "Why the hell should I pay for it?"

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He paused and glared back at her. "You've got all the money."

"I've got all the money? Oh, that's a laugh. *I've* got all the money!"

"Go on, keep it up." Then in a louder voice, as if he wanted to make sure I heard, he said, "Bitch." And stalked away from her.

She watched him until he was gone inside the corridor leading to the restrooms; she was as rigid as a chunk of wood. She sat that way for another five or six seconds, until the wind gusted outside, thudded against the door and the window like something trying to break in. Jerkily she got to her feet and came over to where I was at the sandwich board. Those cold lights still glowed in her eyes.

"Is his sandwich ready?"

I nodded and made myself smile. "Will that be all, ma'am?"

"No. I've changed my mind. I want something to eat too." She leaned forward and stared at the glass pastry container on the back counter. "What kind of pie is that?"

"Cinnamon apple."

"I'll have a piece of it."

"Okay–sure. Just one?"

"Yes. Just one."

I turned back there, got the pie out, cut a slice, and wrapped it in waxed paper. When I came around with it she was rummaging in her purse, getting her wallet out. Back in the restroom area, I heard the man's hard, heavy steps; in the next second he appeared. And headed straight for the door.

The woman said, "How much do I owe you?"

I put the pie into the paper sack with the sandwich, and the sack on the counter. "That'll be three eighty."

The man opened the door; the wind came shrieking in, eddying drafts of icy air. He went right on out, not even glancing at the woman or me, and slammed the door shut behind him.

She laid a five-dollar bill on the counter. Caught up the sack, pivoted, and started for the door.

"Ma'am?" I said. "You've got change coming."

She must have heard me, but she didn't look back and she didn't slow up. The pair of headlights came on out front, slicing pale wedges from the darkness; through the front window I could see the evergreens at the far edge of the lot, thick swaying shadows bent almost double by the wind. The shrieking rose again for two or three seconds, then fell back to a muted whine; she was gone.

I had never been gladder or more relieved to see customers go. I let out another breath, picked up the fiver, and moved over to the

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cash register. Outside, above the thrumming and wailing, the car engine revved up to a roar and there was the ratcheting noise of tires spinning on gravel. The headlights shot around and probed out toward the county highway.

Time now to close up and go home, all right; I wanted a glass of brandy and a good hot fire more than ever. I went around to the tables they'd used, to gather up the coffee cups. But as much as I wanted to forget the two of them, I couldn't seem to get them out of my mind. Especially the woman.

I kept seeing those eyes of hers, cold and hateful like the wind, as if there was a black wind blowing inside her, too, and she'd been listening to it too long. I kept seeing her lean forward across the counter and stare at the pastry container. And I kept seeing her rummage in that big alligator purse when I turned around with the slice of pie. Something funny about the way she'd been doing that. As if she hadn't just been getting her wallet out to pay me. As if she'd been–

Oh, my God, I thought.

I ran back behind the counter. Then I ran out again to the door, threw it open, and stumbled onto the gravel lot. But they were long gone; the night was a solid ebony wall.

I didn't know what to do. What could I do? Maybe she'd done what I suspicioned, and maybe she hadn't; I couldn't be sure because I don't keep an inventory on the slots of utensils behind the sandwich board. And I didn't know who they were or where they were going. I didn't even know what kind of car they were riding in.

I kept on standing there, chills racing up and down my back, listening to that black wind scream and scream around me. Feeling the cold sharp edge of it cut into my bare flesh, cut straight to the bone.

Just like the blade of a knife . . .

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

One day last year the mail included three very short manuscripts, all of which proved to be "first stories." One came from Northfield, New Jersey, another from Pickering, Ontario, Canada, and the third from National City, California—transcontinental and international submissions. The three short-shorts were the work of newcomers to the field, but newcomers, properly encouraged (in this case, given debuts in print), are the lifeblood of our genre's future. So we decided to publish the three stories in the same issue (after all, they had arrived together)—EQMM "first stories" numbers 523, 524, and 525. And it is interesting to note that the three stories deal with different crimes—bank robbery, murder, and a most unusual crime even in fiction—and that all three stories are veined with humor.

The first story is by Richard Roesberg of Northfield, New Jersey, who was twenty-nine when he submitted his story. "For the past five years," he wrote, "I have been managing a card, gift, and book shop, but managing includes cashiering, buying, stocking shelves, hiring, scheduling, payrolling, and removing chewing gum from the carpet . . . My hobbies include camping, beachcombing, museum hopping, and sketching . . .

THE FASTIDIOUS BANK TELLER

by RICHARD ROESBERG

Some people in Oakshade thought Everett Pugh was a touch insane. He preferred to think of himself as fastidious. To be fair to everyone, you might call him insanely fastidious. So it was natural that he gravitated to banking early, and stayed with it. He'd have made a poor grocer. The first dented can or piece of bruised fruit would have outraged his compulsion for neatness. Where would

1979 by Richard Roesberg.

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he segregate them? How could he explain them away? No, being a bank teller was the profession for someone who needed a place for everything and insisted that everything be kept in its place.

So when the Federal Bank of Oakshade suffered the first robbery in its history, Everett Pugh was more offended than upset. When the police arrived, he was the only one who wasn't disheveled and visibly shaken. If Oakshade hadn't been a one-bank town and they hadn't all had first-hand knowledge of Pugh's habits, he would have appeared suspiciously forewarned, like the inside man of a robbery. As it was, they chose to ignore the eccentric teller and question his plump, Mother-Goosey neighbor at the next window who had actually confronted the robber. No matter what they asked her she kept on regretting aloud that she hadn't followed her doctor's advice to retire for the sake of her ailing feet.

"Mrs. Ogilvy," the frustrated Chief of Police pleaded, wiping a red handkerchief across his high shining forehead, "I know the man was masked, but did you notice anything about him? Did he remind you of anyone you've seen in here before?"

When Mrs. Ogilvy numbly shook her head, Pugh felt obligated to offer his own observations. He couldn't abide this confusion.

"That man most certainly was not one of our regular customers. When he wanted to coerce Mrs. Ogilvy by threatening to shoot me, he had to read my name off my plaque. And even then he mispronounced it. He said 'pug,' as in dog, when it should have been 'pew,' as in church."

Lordy, thought Chief Abrams, if there'd been any fingerprints, Mr. Fussy here would have wiped them up. He envisioned Pugh going home in his customary navy-blue suit and narrow tie with two regimental stripes, and never taking either off until he went to bed. Maybe he wore the tie to bed too. His momentary reverie was interrupted as Pugh contributed more of his unwanted opinions.

"Another thing about that fellow–he had filthy hands. All his fingers were covered with newsprint. It looked as if he'd just read a week of *The Times* fresh from the printers."

Chief Abrams needed nothing less than a picky old man interrupting his already floundering investigation. He drafted a young patrolman who was standing idle nearby to occupy Pugh's attention.

Had Pugh noticed the color of the bank robber's shirt? No, but the cuffs were very worn.

Did Pugh detect any accent? None, just bad grammar.

Was there anything at all unusual Pugh had noted? Yes, the only

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two matching articles of clothing the robber wore were his ski mask and socks.

For someone so observant, Mr. Pugh was not much help. The patrolman replaced his cap and turned resignedly away.

"Well," concluded Pugh, "I'm glad he's gone back up north. Now we'll be able to return to our schedule."

"Up north?" questioned the patrolman.

"Certainly. His shoes were soiled with that awful red clay they have in those parts. The only reason I go up there myself is that it's the one place I can get my shirts properly laundered."

With that the younger officer urged his superior aside to consider Pugh's complaints and the inadvertent clues they offered. The suspect was from out of town, somewhere to the north, and handled a lot of fresh newsprint. There were only two towns to the north before open country began and one of them was the drop point for newspapers distributed throughout the tri-county area.

Sure enough, the next day the two officers drove up to Bricktown in plainclothes, visited the news company, checked everyone who handled the papers, narrowed them down to one man, and spooked a confession out of him. The man couldn't understand how they knew about him in such detail–even to the fact that his car's upholstery must be shot because he'd covered it with an old blanket. Pugh had noticed unsightly bits of colored wool clinging to the back of the bank robber's pants.

After the arrest there was much cause to celebrate. Chief Abrams had solved his biggest case in 25 years and hoped to reach retirement without another. The rookie had added a commendation to his record and earned the boss's personal gratitude. Mrs. Ogilvy was spared any more questioning and the bank regained all its money. Finally, Everett Pugh received an appropriate reward after the police explained that he'd been instrumental in locating and identifying the criminal. Everyone was happy. Everyone except Everett Pugh.

The reward money entirely upset his budget. All his regular bills had been allowed for. He'd been putting away for his golden years at a sane rate and didn't want to disrupt his timetable. What was he to do with all this surplus money? It was annoying to be forced to change his carefully organized plans.

"Q"

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Story number two came from Amy Crossley of Pickering, Ontario, who was thirty-two when she mailed her story. She is the mother of three boys, and her husband is the editor of a Canadian legal publication. She has had "a checquered job history"–typist, claims adjuster, student adviser, secretary, bookkeeper, saleswoman, and "most important of all, a reporter on suburban newspapers . . . I liked the crime beat best—police and court work."

THE ABOMINABLE AD MAN

by AMY CROSSLEY

Everyone in the advertising department hated Richard (call me R.H.) Hailey, the manager.

Annette Cobb, the bookkeeper, hated him because he bought air time on television channels in broadcast areas where there wasn't a Parton's store for 100 miles, and she had to charge off the buys, making a shambles of her ledgers and the advertising budget.

Fred Prescott, the production manager, hated him because he wrote letters to Parton's dealers in Montana promising them 8000 special flyers for their Founders Day Sale, with a copy of the letter to the President, but not a word about it to Fred.

Tony Christie, the art director, hated him because he made corrections on finished art with a green magic marker.

Mary Barrett, the secretary, hated him because he had her type up fourteen-column charts of July sales for each state, then realized the next day that he had provided her with the figures of the wrong year.

Carla Garcia, the copywriter, hated him because he personally edited her Spanish-language radio scripts when he didn't know a word of Spanish.

Everyone in the advertising department worked a lot of overtime as a result, which R.H. refused to authorize for payment on the grounds that competent people finish their work during regular office hours. He himself never found it necessary to remain after five.

Early one morning the security guard found Richard Hailey

1979 by Amy Crossley.

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slumped over his desk with his head bashed in. A video cassette player glazed with blood lay on the floor.

"Who did it, Chief?" Detective Barry Price asked Detective Lieutenant Tom Quinlan after they had interviewed all the suspects as they arrived at work. "Or was it a professional job?"

"Very professional," his superior replied. "Start by having the books checked."

The police expert arrived. "The Lieutenant suspects the bookkeeper," Price told him sagely as they settled down with the ledgers.

"Look at this, Chief," Price called out an hour later. Every member of the advertising department put in for an hour's overtime last night!"

"As I suspected," Quinlan replied. "A very professional job. They all take the credit."

Produced by Fred Prescott
Directed by Tony Christie
From a Concept by Carla Garcia
Financial Advice by Annette Cobb
Technical Assistance by Mary Barrett

"Q"

Story number three is by Vyvyan McAmis Bretz of National City, California. She was thirty-one when she submitted her first story. She is a housewife, with two sons, and a husband in the Navy. "I began writing," she informed us, "because I was bored. One can only dust, vacuum, and read so much Agatha Christie!"

THE MYSTERIOUS ATTORNEY

by VYVYAN McAMIS BRETZ

Gourman Springs is a very small town. It's not quite one-horse, but close. There are, in fact, 53 people, 12 horses, 9 trucks, and no cars unless you count Bubba Jacobs' broken-down '55 Chevy which hasn't run since '63.

© 1979 by Vyvyan McAmis Bretz.

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Everyone in the town farms. There is nothing else to do unless you want to run the gas station, but Henry Williamson owns and runs that in his spare time. Or unless you want to be the town minister, but Harley Rhodes has held that position for nearly 12 years.

The townspeople go 42 miles to Lordsberry to buy their supplies. Not that they need too much extra food since all eight families do farm. Every other Saturday afternoon they all gather in Ned Cobely's large front yard to trade off the food that they aren't going to eat or take to market.

The food values vary with each family's needs. Normally, for instance, ten pounds of onions would trade straight across for ten pounds of potatoes. A bushel of carrots would equal three gallons of cow's milk. Two chickens would get you about a bushel of corn.

The Rowlins family, which consists of ten children, a mother, no father, two cows, and a dozen chickens, gets more for their milk, eggs, butter, and chickens than do the more prosperous families. It seems fair to everyone concerned.

Exactly four miles out of Gourman Springs there begins a narrow road which, after three-quarters of a mile, leads to a small whitewashed cottage.

Until recently the cottage had been vacant for over 20 years. Its last owner, Anna Crawford, had died of consumption 22 years ago. Most of the older town members still remember Anna. It's none too soon that anyone who personally knew the resident witch could forget her.

Anna Crawford's only relatives live a state away and have never had any use for the cottage. It would have sold very cheaply if anyone had been interested. In 22 years' time there had been many a young couple who would have liked to have had a small place of their own. But none of the locals was about to live in a cottage the old Crawford witch was no doubt haunting.

But then one day a stranger, who claimed he hailed from Craigsburg about 100 miles upstate, showed up in Lordsberry looking for a small secluded house. The man, one George P. Smith, went to every real-estate broker in Lordsberry before he wound up sitting in the one and only real-estate office in Gourman Springs.

Jeremy Halston, owner and sole employee of Halston Realty, had been expounding for some ten minutes on the honesty and integrity of his small but reliable company when Mr. Smith interrupted the older man to remind him he was in a hurry. He was an attorney,

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he said, and he had some important matters waiting for him back in Craigsburg.

"Now, let's see if I have this straight," said Jeremy Halston, a little put out. He didn't get customers too often, and he had another ten minutes of expounding in him that wanted out. "You're looking for a small house, one bedroom will do, away from people, that you would like to rent or buy. May I be presumptuous enough, Mr. Smith, as to ask you why a young man–you don't look over thirty to me–would want to live in a small secluded house all by himself?"

"First of all, Mr. Halston, I don't care for presumptuous people. Secondly, I'm thirty-three, so you're wrong about that. And thirdly, I never said it was for myself. Not that it's any of your business, but I'm trying to find a nice quiet place where my elderly, arthritic aunt can live out her remaining years in privacy. She doesn't care for people or their pity. Now, since I seem to be wasting my precious time–"

"No, wait, Mr. Smith. I think I have the perfect place for you."

Three weeks later the little cottage outside of Gourman Springs was almost ready for George Smith's elderly aunt. George, himself, had cleaned, repaired, and painted the entire house.

One day he backed up a small rental van to the cottage and unloaded an old stove, a small refrigerator, a bed, and a few small boxes. Three days later he returned in his two-tone green sedan with a few bags of groceries in the back.

The Gourman Springs residents were missing none of this. They knew everything Jeremy Halston knew about George Smith since Halston's middle son, Clarence, was dating Henry Williamson's youngest daughter, Nell. None of the Halston clan was known to be tight-lipped.

The only road in town meandered around until it passed all eight homes plus the gas station and the church. This road was the only way to get out to the old Crawford place. So everyone in Gourman Springs knew about Mr. Smith's comings and goings. They all figured he had returned north to pick up his aunt after leaving the groceries he had no doubt bought in Lordsberry, judging by the Santa Claus grocery bags in the back of his car.

At Christmastime two and a half years ago, Harrison Winslow, owner of the only cut-rate supermarket in Lordsberry where everybody in Gourman Springs shopped, had ordered special bags with a picture of Santa on the side of each one. Christmas came and went

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but the Santa Claus bags kept on coming. Every month he would get a new shipment besides the plain brown bags he usually ordered. Harrison tried to straighten out the mix-up, but since he wasn't being billed for the Christmas bags, he didn't try too hard. He soon realized there was no need to keep shelling out his hard-earned money for brown bags, so he canceled his regular order and started using all that extra cash to help keep his favorite bartender in the black.

Anyway, grocery bags aside, all Gourman Springs was now on the lookout for the two-tone green sedan to come downshifting through town with George Smith and an elderly lady inside. But it never happened, not in the light of day, anyway. About a week after Smith had been seen driving back up north, he was seen again, but he was on his way north again. Everyone figured the pair must have got into town late one night when everybody was asleep.

The 42-year-old Garfield twins, known for the past 23 years as Rachel Cobely and Rebecca Newburg, decided it was high time to take a baked ham, a mincemeat pie, and some jars of homemade preserves out to welcome Gourman Springs' 54th resident. Actually, 55th since poor Miss Rowlins had her eleventh child six days ago. The twins could never figure how she kept doing that without a husband.

It was noon when the ladies drove up to the cottage. They got out of Rebecca's old truck, each carrying something homemade, and started walking up the stone path. A growl stopped them short. From out of nowhere came a very skinny, very hungry-looking German shepherd. He was on a chain, but the twins didn't stay around to test its strength.

Within half an hour after the ladies had been scared out of their wits, the whole town knew about the fierce-looking watchdog. While the older members of each household were pondering over why George Smith and his aunt felt one was necessary, three of the younger town members had already started off for the old Crawford place to see for themselves what a real German shepherd looked like. The only place any of them had seen a purebred dog was in picture books.

All three boys, Chester Rhodes, Slim Rowlins, and Herbert Baker, were 13 and very curious. They all piled on Herbert's mule and rode the four miles. They tethered the mule a good distance away from the cottage and snuck up as close to the yard as they could without disturbing the dog.

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The German shepherd was lying in the shade of a large old elm, trying to outsleep the afternoon sun. He was a brute, all right. Even asleep he looked mean.

"He'd be a right nice-looking dog if he weren't so skinny," one of the boys said too loudly. The dog awoke and was at the end of his chain before any of them could let out a decent scream. He scared the apple cider right out of them. As the three of them were high-tailing it toward the mule, they all thanked their lucky stars they hadn't been crouching two feet closer.

From that day on no one in Gourman Springs outwardly showed any interest in the mysterious old lady. They all hoped that she and that man-eating dog of hers were very happy together.

After several months George Smith's weekly trip through the town to bring supplies or to just visit his aunt became as routine as the Thursday night Bingo game at the church.

Just as she moved into Gourman Springs a little over three years ago, George Smith's aunt left in the privacy of the night. As before, no one actually saw her, but they did see Mr. Smith drive into town, then later out of it, with a rental van similar to the one he had used to bring his aunt's furniture in three years before.

Why was the old lady who had supposedly moved into the cottage to have a place to live out her final years now leaving? No one in the little town knew or figured they would ever find out; no one really cared.

"Get this, Fred," said Harrison Winslow to his still-favorite bartender. "The newspaper says there's this guy up in Craigsburg who actually became a millionaire overnight!"

Fred seemed doubtful.

"Nah, really," Harrison continued. "Seems this guy–uh, let's see, his name is George P. Reynolds–had a rich wife. And I mean rich. But when they married he signed a paper saying he had no claim to her money if they ever divorced. And if she died first, then all her dough went to her son who lived with her first husband.

"You following me, Fred? Okay, now, a little over three years ago, it says, this rich dame disappears. Her husband says she had a boy friend and they probably beat it together, right? Nothing new, huh, Fred?

"Well, here comes the good part. The millionaire lady turns up yesterday walking naked in the middle of the night down Main Street right past the Craigsburg Police Station. And she's stark

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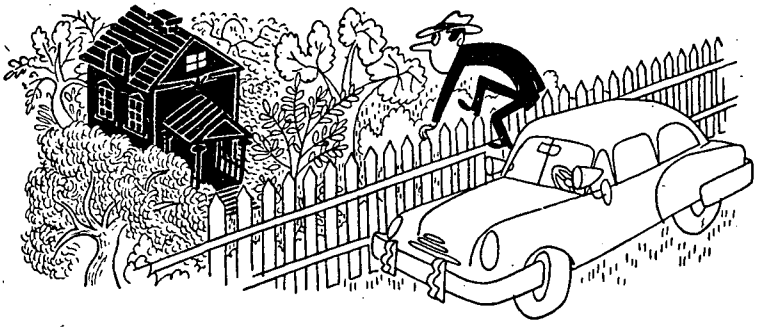
raving mad! She doesn't know who she is or where she is! She's sick and dirty and crusty like she hadn't had a bath in years. And she's so skinny and puny she can't hardly walk. The only thing they can get out of her is something about a dog.

"Anyway, they're putting her away, probably in a padded cell. And this George character is now the one who's rich. But get this, Fred. It was the only way this guy could lay his hands on all that money. The only way. The dame had to go crazy first.

"What were the odds of that happening, huh, Fred? What blind luck!"



NEXT MONTH . . .

10 ***NEW*** novelets and short stories—including

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Simon Ark)

BRIAN GARFIELD (about Charlie Dark)

RUTH RENDELL (about Inspector Wexford)

PATRICIA McGERR (about Selena Mead)

CELIA FREMLIN (about a lovely morning to die)

and a "lost" story by

JOHN DICKSON CARR (about the door to doom)

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

It is again that time of year when it is appropriate to salute, applaud and otherwise express satisfaction with the giants of the mystery world for having achieved excellence beyond reasonable expectations. The list of winners of the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America follows, together with those who were awarded scrolls for outstanding achievements (the awards, presented in 1979, are for works produced in 1978):

Best Novel: *The Eye of the Needle* by Ken Follett (Arbor House). Also: *The Snake,* John Godey (Putnam), *Listening Woman,* Tony Hillerman (Harper & Row), *A Sleeping Life,* Ruth Rendell (Doubleday), *The Shallow Grave,* Jack S. Scott (Harper & Row).

Best First Novel: *Killed in the Ratings* by William L. DeAndrea (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich). Also: *The Scourge,* Thomas L. Dunne (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan), *Falling Angel,* William Hjortsberg (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich), *Blood Secrets,* Craig Jones (Harper & Row), *The Memory of Eva Ryker,* Donald A. Stanwood (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan).

Best Short Story: "The Cloud Beneath the Eaves" by Barbara Owens (*EQMM*). Also: "Going Backward," David Ely (*EQMM*), "Strangers in the Fog," Bill Pronzini (*EQMM*), "The Closed Door," Thomas Walsh (*EQMM*), "This Is Death," Donald E. Westlake (*EQMM*).

Best Critical Biographical Study: *The Mystery of Agatha Christie* by Gwen Robins (Doubleday). Also: *Erle Stanley Gardner: The Case of the Real Perry Mason,* Dorothy B. Hughes (Morrow), *The Tell-Tale Heart: The Life and Work of Edgar Allan Poe,* Julian Symons (Harper & Row), *The Detective in Hollywood,* Jon Tuska (Doubleday).

Best Fact Crime: *Til Death Do Us Part* by Vincent Bugliosi and Ken Hurwitz (Norton). Also: *Why Have They Taken Our Children?,* Jack W. Baugh and Jefferson Morgan (Delacorte), *Criminal Violence,* Charles Silberman (Ran-

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dom House), *Perjury,* Alan Weinstein (Knopf).

Best Paperback: *Deceit and Deadly Lies* by Frank Bandy (Charter). Also: *Stud Game,* David Anthony (Pocket Books), *The Switch,* Elmore Leonard (Bantam), *Heartstone,* Philip Margolin (Pocket Books), *Charnel House,* Graham Masterton (Pinnacle).

Best Juvenile: *Alone in Wolf Hollow* by Dana Brookins (Seabury Press). Also: *The Bassumtyte Treasure,* Jean Louise Curry (Atheneum/Margaret K. McElderry Books), *Emily Upham's Revenge,* Avi (Pantheon), *The Halloween Pumpkin Smasher,* Judith St. George (Putnam), *The Case of the Secret Scribbler,* E. W. Hildick (Macmillan).

Best Motion Picture: *Death on the Nile,* screenplay by Anthony Shaffer (Paramount). Also: *Magic,* William Goldman (20th Century-Fox), *Foul Play,* Collin Higgins (Paramount), *Somebody Killed Her Husband,* Reginald Rose (Columbia), *The Big Fix,* Roger Simon (Universal).

Best Television Program: *Dashiell Hammett's The Dain Curse,* teleplay by Robert Lenski (CBS). Also: *Someone's Watching Me!,* John Carpenter (NBC), *Perfect Gentlemen,* Nora Ephron (CBS), *When Every Day Was the Fourth of July,* Lee Hutson (NBC).

Best Television Program in a Series: "Murder Under Glass" (*Columbo*), teleplay by Robert Van Scoyk (NBC). Also: "Vega$" (Pilot, *Vega$*), Michael Mann (ABC), "Murder on the Flip Side" (*Eddie Capra Mysteries),* Lee Sheldon (NBC).

In addition, special awards were presented to:

Frederic Dannay (Ellery Queen) and Mignon G. Eberhart in celebration of their fifty years at the top of their profession;

Richard Levinson and William Link, for their many contributions to mysteries on television, particularly the creation of *Columbo*;

Alberto Tedeschi, Editorial Director at Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan, Italy, in honor of his fifty years of publishing mysteries and for his enthusiastic support of the genre in Italy—this unanimously supported award was saddened by the news of Mr. Tedeschi's death in Italy less than a month later;

Aaron Marc Stein, author of more than 100 mystery novels, who received the ultimate of all awards in the mystery genre, the Grand Master Award, for his outstanding contribution to the art of mystery writing.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The Last Embrace envelops you in a plot and pursuit of torrential frenzies. An ex-spy (he's had a breakdown) simultaneously meets a mysterious young woman and begins getting cabalistic threats on his life he must unravel.

The inscription on the death threat—which he soon learns he is not the first victim to receive—takes him to an ancient synagogue in New York's Lower East Side, to the hushed library corridors of Princeton University, and finally to the boiling brink of Niagara Falls; he finds terror everywhere. Both Roy Scheider and Janet Margolin bring a vulnerability and intensity to their roles that make this thriller believable, while young director Jonathan Demme (who calls the film "a dark romance") peppers it with so much homage to Alfred Hitchcock—including a fitfully agitato musical score by Miklos Rozsa—that the chills are very vintage, the plot (from Murray Teigh Bloom's novel, *The Thirteenth Man)* interestingly complex. Yet, alas, after carrying the viewer through the film on currents of baffling intrigue, *Last Embrace* finishes unsatisfyingly with a climax (Margolin suspended over the Falls) which though breathless is silly. Getting there was *all* the fun.

Other recent thrillers disappoint as well. *Firepower* just fizzles, despite the charms of Sophia Loren and director Michael Winner's winning ways with shock and spark (the explosive content of the film is high). *Winter Kills* is another assassination-conspiracy plot, paranoid and bizarre—a murdered U.S. President's younger brother (Jeff Bridges) hopelessly tries to expose the dark, ruthless superpowers controlling and manipulating us all. A super cast—including John Huston, Anthony Perkins, Sterling Hayden, and Eli Wallach playing a variety of sinister chess-pieces—fails to save us.

Even though the Chester Gould artwork in *Dick Tracy: The Thirties* (evocatively subtitled *Tommyguns and Hard Times;* published by Chelsea House) is still primitive—the golden age of that strip did not begin until later than the first three years (1931-33) reprinted in the book—the mood and plot are surprisingly powerful. The Depression had much to do with shaping the vigilante-detective—there had been nothing like him in the newspaper "funnies" before—and the boldly etched violence of the strip was never in those days muted. "Show the bullets going through the body," was a directive of the fabled Captain Joseph Patterson,

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head of the Chicago Tribune Syndicate, and this became a Gould trademark.

The Chicago rackets of the era contributed endless gunfights to the strip, back-alley sluggings, mobsters like Big Boy (Capone) and Stooge Viller (modeled after Edward G. Robinson's screen toughs), dubious nightclub hostesses, crooked lawyers, bond forgers, and other metropolitan Underworld types always sketched in stark, bold graphics. But Gould's Midwest origins (he was born in Oklahoma) served to bring Tracy out into the terrors which often lurked in rural settings as well. The detective himself was always somewhat clenched, but Gould from the start peopled his strip with a rich gallery of character players: evil Steve the Tramp, raspy Larceny Lu, troubled prospector Hank Steele, alluring Texie Garcia, plus pickpockets, vagrants, farmers, and others never far from real life. Actual headlines of the day counterpoint some of the stories, such as the kidnaping of rich youngster Buddy Waldorf (read Lindbergh). Another youngster, a nameless orphan later to be called Dick Tracy Junior, enters the detective's life and humanizes him. This excellent book is Tracy in his earliest years, already on his way to becoming—along with Sherlock Holmes—the world's best-known, most-beloved crime-fighter.

Also coming soon is the paperback *Dick Tracy Versus Angeltop* by Max Collins and Rick Fletcher, a reprinting of the complete episodes (1977-78) involving Flattop's vengeful daughter, and including a generous *Rogue's Gallery* of classic Tracy villains.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

In recent years it has been a common practice of reviewers and blurb-writers to compare authors of detective fiction, both old pros and tyros but mostly British and/or female, to Agatha Christie. But the writer who may be closest of all to Christie in style, plotting, and general milieu, E. X. Ferrars, has been curiously overlooked in such comparisons. That Ferrars seldom uses a series sleuth may partially account for her lesser recognition.

The standard reference sources on detective fiction unanimously undervalue Ferrars. She is treated dismissively in both Barzun and Taylor's *A Catalogue of Crime* and in *The Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection,* and she is not even mentioned in Julian Symons' *Mortal Conse-*

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quences. Lovers of the formal detective story should try her latest novel.

*** E. X. Ferrars: *In at the Kill,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $7.95. As with Christie, the plot is neat and comprehensive, the style straightforward, the clues generously showcased, and the characters, if not deeply probed, well differentiated. The suspenseful conclusion is full of expert bluffs. The construction and execution are all the more remarkable for appearing so simple and effortless.

*** Roger L. Simon: *Peking Duck,* Simon and Schuster, $9.95. Private eye Moses Wine visits the People's Republic of China in a witty and well observed specimen of the travelogue mystery. Though Wine goes a bit preachy in the climactic scene before the People's Court, his re-examination of his radical political convictions and his views of his hosts and fellow tourists make it a worthwhile trip for the reader.

*** Randall Garrett: *Murder and Magic,* Ace, $1.95. Here at last is the first collection of Lord Darcy stories, locked-room and impossible-crime mysteries set in an alternate universe where the laws of magic rather than the laws of science rule. The solutions, though, are non-magical. Recommended to lovers of mystery, fantasy, and puns. (Lord Darcy's best case, the 1967 novel *Too Many Magicians,* is available from Gregg Press in a hardcover reprint at $12.50.)

*** Jeffrey Ashford: *The Anger of Fear,* Walker, $7.95. The elements are familiar in this police novel, involving the kidnaping of a sheik's son from an English boarding school, but Ashford deploys them expertly and makes the reader care about his characters.

*** John Lutz: *Lazarus Man,* Morrow, $8.95. Readers who can put aside their reluctance to peruse yet another fictional rehashing of Watergate will find this a beautifully written and crafted thriller with a very appropriate surprise ending.

*** Brad Solomon: *Jake and Katie,* Dial Press, $9.95. An oddly compelling novel of a struggling Hollywood actor and the mysterious pill-popping young woman who enters and takes over his life. There are echoes here of Horace McCoy and James M. Cain (who, in an apparent homage, has a character named after him).

*** J. F. Burke: *Kelly Among the Nightingales,* Dutton, $8.95. The best Sam Kelly case to date offers a pleasing combination of hardboiled and cerebral detection, Burke's usual vivid atmosphere, and interesting sidelights on the publishing world. If only the suspects came to life as the series regulars do.

*** Lionel Black: *A Healthy Way To Die,* Avon, $1.95. Kate and Henry Theobald, some of whose earlier cases were published as by Anthony Matthews, unravel an enjoyable pure whodunit set at an English health farm. (I object, though, to scandal magazines

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being referred to as "the pulps.")
*** Collin Wilcox: *Power Plays,* Random House, $7.95. San Francisco cop Frank Hastings is nearer top form here than in his last couple of cases. Canelli and Friedman, Hastings' principal colleagues, are great characters.
** John Crowe: *Close to Death,* Dodd, Mead, $7.95. The latest Buena Costa County mystery has a promising situation but doesn't quite jell somehow. The author (a.k.a. Dennis Lynds, Michael Collins, William Arden, etc.), who can do great things with his penetrating dialogue and slightly overwrought prose when they work, sometimes succumbs to pretentiousness when they don't.
** Pablo Morales: *Big Deal in Veragua,* Leisure Books, $1.50. Pedro Moreno, middle-aged Latin American editor of a newsmagazine, is a new series character worth meeting, and his adventures here make fast and funny reading. The conclusion though is unsatisfactory and the events of the novel seem to lack a *raison d'etre.*
** Karl Alexander: *Time After Time,* Delacorte, $9.95. H. G. Wells' pursuit of Jack the Ripper from London of the nineties to San Francisco of the seventies makes for enjoyable enough reading, though it doesn't really come to grips with the time-travel paradoxes it implies. Some of Alexander's faulty diction badly needs a good editor's hand.

At least Alexander's book reads like a real novel, not a transparent movie treatment like Kathleen Tynan's *Agatha,* the 1978 novel about Agatha Christie's 1926 disappearance, now available in paperback (Ballantine, $2.25). I expected to be appalled at the novel's distasteful invasion of the late author's privacy, but I thought, wrongly, the book would at least have an ingenious plot. If you've managed to avoid *Agatha* this long, keep that enviable record intact.

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
extends sympathy to the family of

ALBERTO TEDESCHI

and to Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan, Italy, where he served so faithfully and well as Editorial Director.

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DIS-COUNT PRICE
Alexander, Karl	TIME AFTER TIME	Delacorte	$9.95	$7.95
Ashford, Jeffrey	THE ANGER OF FEAR	Walker	7.95	6.35
Barroll, Clare	A STRANGE PLACE FOR MURDER	Scribners	8.95	6.95
Burke, J. F.	KELLY AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES	Dutton	8.95	6.95
Chesbro, George	AN AFFAIR OF SORCERERS	Simon & Schuster	9.95	7.95
Childs, Timothy	COLD TURKEY	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Crowe, John	CLOSE TO DEATH	Dodd, Mead	7.95	6.35
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INVITATION TO MURDER

by REX STOUT

(continued from page 61)

At ten minutes to eight, with the meal nearly over for the five of us at table, I said I didn't care for coffee, which wasn't true, excused myself on a pretext, went up to the third floor, opened the door of Lewent's room, and entered.

I had decided to discover the body.

They had all been agreeable enough at dinner, except Thayer, who was sulking about something; but it was plain that they were humoring me only because Huck had said his brother-in-law must be humored. No one said or did anything that gave me the slightest feeling of a hunch, and as dessert was being served and I took them in–Thayer scowling, and Mrs. O'Shea cold and cocky, and Dorothy Riff smirking at her new wristwatch, and Sylvia Marcy smiling at me like a sympathetic nurse–I had a strong feeling that it would be gratifying to arrange, for each of them, a prolonged interview with a cop, especially a good Homicide man. Also I had to admit that I had got nowhere with my idea of investigating a murder without disclosing that there had been one.

But now, in the narrow passage with the door closed, looking down at the corpse, I was doubling up my fists and setting my jaw. I would never have claimed that I was such a holy terror as a sleuth that no one had better risk a misdemeanor within a mile of me, but someone in this house had certainly had one hell of a nerve to perform on Wolfe's client like that with me wandering all over the premises.

He looked pitiful there on the floor, and even smaller than when he was on his feet and breathing. I was more than willing for the performer to get tagged, the sooner the better, but not by a horde of city employees with me off in a corner being grilled by Lieutenant Rowcliff. On the other hand, at my rate of progress for the past two and a half hours, I would reach first base about a week from Tuesday.

I listened at the door a minute, opened it, passed through, and pulled it shut. I stood. There was no sight, sound, or smell of man or woman. I went to the stairs and started down quietly, which was no feat on the carpeted treads. At the bottom I stood again. Sounds

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of voices came up from the floor below, where dinner had been served, so they were still at the table. I headed down the hall for the door to Huck's study.

It was dark in there, but I closed the door before groping for the wall switch. It gave me light from ceiling fixtures, plenty, and I crossed to Huck's desk, which was actually two desks with an alley between them for his wheelchair, so that when he maneuvered into the alley he had desk space on both sides. There were three phones on the left, one a house phone and the other two labeled with their numbers, but the numbers were different. One of them was the number listed in the phone book, and I moved it forward, since it was the one I wanted to use, no matter how many extensions were on it.

Needing two props, I looked around. One of them, exactly what I wanted, was on the other desk–a paperweight, a heavy ball of green marble with a segment sliced off to give it a base. For the other, there were hundreds of books available, and any of them would do. I would have liked to do some experimenting to find out how thick a book to use and how hard to hit it to get the effect I wanted, but under the circumstances it was not advisable. I got one about an inch thick, too intent on my program to notice the title, put it flat on the other desk, not the one the phone was on, lifted the receiver, dialed a number, and took the paperweight in my right hand.

Fritz answered, and I told him I was sorry to interrupt Wolfe's dinner if he wasn't finished, but I had to ask him something. After a wait his gruff voice came.

"Yes, Archie?"

I gave it pace and urgency. "I'm in Huck's study, and there may be someone on an extension, but I can't help it. If I call the cops now there'll be hell to pay, because–no, it's too long to explain. You absolutely refuse to leave the house on business, okay, but what about Saul? I need him. If you can get Saul–"

I cut myself off by bringing the paperweight down on the book and emitting the kind of sharp little agonized grunt a man may emit when he is solidly and accurately conked, and I let the receiver drop to the desk with a clatter. Also I collapsed onto the floor with enough racket to reach the transmitter, but not enough, I hoped, to alarm Huck up above or the quartet down below. Then I got back onto my feet and stood regarding the receiver lying on the table. That was a question I had left open. It might seem more natural for

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the cracker of my skull to replace the receiver, but if Wolfe dialed the number I certainly didn't want extensions ringing all over the place, and this way he would get a busy signal. So I let it lie.

It was now a matter of timing. Wolfe could conceivably try dialing the number, fail to get it, and shrug it off, but I doubted it. He was tough, but not that tough. He could phone the cops to please come and feel my pulse, but he never would, not after okaying my postponement of reporting a homicide. Then he would come himself, which was of course the idea, and I wanted to be at the door to let him in, but I did not want to leave the study at once, with the receiver out of its cradle.

Two minutes would surely see him out of the house and on his way, but I would allow ten. I put the paperweight back, returned the book to its place on a shelf, and spent the rest of the time gazing at my watch. At the end of the tenth minute I replaced the receiver, left the room, and went down a flight to the entrance hall.

Dorothy Riff was there with her hat on, putting on her coat. If I had been thirty seconds later I would have been minus a member of the cast. She shot me a glance but offered no converse. I asked her courteously, "You're not leaving us?"

"Yes." She was brusque. "I'm going home. Any objection?"

"Yes." I was brusque too.

"Oh?" She cocked an eye. "You have?"

I nodded. "I've decided that you folks are too genteel for me. I'm the type that sticks thumbs in people's eyes, and this is the wrong setting for it. I have phoned Mr. Wolfe to tell him that, and he agrees, and he's on his way up here. He will particularly want to speak with you, since it was you who suggested that his client is a blackmailer, so if you don't mind waiting?"

She was frowning. "Nero Wolfe coming here?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

I waved a hand. "To detect."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, I won't try to sell you on it. Seeing is believing, and seeing him you can believe anything. I have appointed myself doorman, to let no one out, and to let him in."

"That's silly. I can go if I please."

"Sure you can. If you think Huck would like that."

She opened her mouth, shut it again, turned and made for the stairs, and flew up. As she did so, Paul Thayer emerged from a door

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on the right, from the room where the TV was, followed by Mrs. O'Shea and Sylvia Marcy. They came on, Thayer demanding, "What's all the powwow? Where's Miss Riff?"

I said I had told her that Wolfe was on his way to join us, and she had gone up to tell Huck. The news did not visibly impress Mrs. O'Shea, but Sylvia cooed something appreciatively, and Thayer backed off, lowering his chin and gazing at me from under his heavy brows. He had no question or comment, but the two women did. Mrs. O'Shea stated that she had always thought that professional detectives caused more trouble than they cured, and now she was sure of it. Miss Marcy said she would love to be asked questions by Nero Wolfe, even if it wasn't something dreadful like murder, only her mind wasn't very quick and she hoped he wouldn't get her tangled up about some little thing.

A buzzer sounded. I went and opened the door, and Wolfe stepped in.

He gave me a piercing glance, swept his eyes around to take in the others, returned to me, and muttered, "Well?"

"Miss Marcy," I said. "Mrs. O'Shea. Mr. Thayer. This is Mr. Wolfe."

He inclined his head a quarter of an inch. "How do you do." Again to me, louder and plainer, "Well?"

"There's an elevator," I told him, "which makes it simple. We all take it. You and I get off on the next floor and go to the study, and I explain the situation. The others go to Mr. Huck's room on the floor above and tell him we'll be up shortly, if that's how you would like to handle it. If otherwise, you send me up with a message. Perfectly simple. Your coat and hat?"

He let me take them. Putting them on a chair and making for the elevator, with them following, I heard Sylvia cooing something at him but didn't catch it. One flight up Wolfe and I got out, and I led the way down the hall to the study, opened the door, and stood aside for him. When I turned from closing the door he was facing me.

"Well?" he growled.

"Yes, sir. May I show you?"

I crossed to the desks and got between them. "I used this phone." I touched it. "I put a book here." I tapped the spot. "After dialing the number I took this in my right hand." I picked up the paperweight. "At an appropriate moment I hit the book with it, grunted, let the receiver fall to the table, and dropped on the floor."

That was one of the two or three times, possibly four, that I have

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seen him speechless. He didn't even glare. He looked around, saw no chair that appealed to him, went to a couch against a wall, sat, and buttressed himself by spreading his arms and putting his palms flat on the couch.

"I forwent salad, cheese, and coffee," he said, "and came at once."

"Yes, sir. I fully appreciate it. I can–"

"Shut up. You regard my rule not to leave my house on a business errand as one of the stubborn poses of a calculated eccentricity. It is no such luxury; it is merely a necessity for a tolerable existence. Without such a rule a private detective is the slave of all the exigencies of his neighbors, and in New York there are ten million of them. Are you too headstrong to understand me?"

"No. But I can–"

"Shut up." He had relaxed enough to tighten his lips and glare. He shook his head. "No. Talk."

I moved a chair and planted it in front of him, knowing that he disliked tilting his head to look up at people. When I sat I was close enough to keep my voice down almost to a whisper. "I'm fairly sure this room isn't wired for sound," I said, "and that there's no one hiding in here, but we don't have to bellow. I would like to tell you what has happened in the last three hours. It will take seven minutes."

"I'm here," he growled. "Talk."

I did so, going overtime some, but not much. There was a pained and peevish look on his face throughout, but I could tell by his eyes that he was listening. Having covered the events, such as they were, I proceeded to cover me.

"When I left the dinner table and went upstairs," I declared, "I fully intended to glance in at the corpse and call the cops. But as I stood looking down at him I realized that I would have to call you first to tell you what I was going to do, and I didn't want to call you from here. I needed instructions. When the cops came, if I told them what Lewent had hired us to do, and the inmates here told them what I had said he had hired us to do, I would be in the middle of another of those dam tangles that have been known to keep me on a straight-backed chair in the D.A.'s office for ten hours running. You would be in it too. I had to ask you to consider that and decide it, and I didn't want to leave here to go out to phone."

He grunted, not sympathetically.

"After all," I submitted, "no bones are broken, except Lewent's skull. You can tell me what to do and say, and go back home and

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have your salad and cheese and coffee. After you're safely outside I'll go up to our client's room to ask him something and will be horrified to find him dead, and will rush to notify the household and call the police. As for the thousand bucks he paid you, surely he would admit that you have earned it by coming up here to tell me how to manage things so that his death will cause us as little inconvenience as possible."

He eyed me. It was precisely the kind of situation that would normally have called for an outraged roar, in the privacy of his office, but here he had to hold it.

"Poppycock," he muttered bitterly. "You know quite well what you have done and are doing, and so do I. The police, and especially Mr. Cramer, would never believe that you would dare to trick me into coming here for anything less than murder, and they know that without a trick I wouldn't come at all. So I'll have to discuss murder with these people. Is there a decent chair in Mr. Huck's room?"

"Yeah, one that will do, but don't expect to like it."

"I won't." He stood up. "Very well. Let's go."

The chair problem in Huck's room required a little handling. After Wolfe had been introduced to Huck and Dorothy Riff, and Huck assented, without enthusiasm, to Wolfe's desire to discuss the affairs of his client Herman Lewent, there remained the fact that Paul Thayer was occupying the only chair that could take Wolfe without squeezing, and Thayer, who was still sulking, paid no attention to my polite hint. When I asked him to move and even said please, he gave me a dirty look as he complied.

As Wolfe sat and turned his head from left to right and back again, taking them in, and they focused on him, I was not utterly at ease because I had slid out from under the responsibility. He had said he would have to discuss murder with them, and in the heat of his resentment at my having foxed him into taking a two-mile taxi ride he might regard it as funny to manage it so that I would have not less to explain to the cops, but more.

Huck spoke. "I have explained to Mr. Goodwin that I tolerated his intrusion out of deference to my brother-in-law." His tone wasn't very deferential. "But now your barging in–frankly, Mr. Wolfe, there is a limit to my forbearance."

Wolfe nodded. "I don't blame you, sir. I return your candor and confess that the fault is Mr. Goodwin's. On account of a defect in his make-up he has botched his errand here so badly that I was

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compelled to intervene. When he phoned me, twice, some four hours ago, not from this house, I suspected that he had been so thoroughly bewitched by one of these women that his mental processes were in suspense. It hits him like that. When later he phoned again, this time from your study, my fear was verified, and I was even able to identify the witch."

He looked straight at Mrs. O'Shea, then at Miss Riff, then at Miss Marcy, but got no return because they were all looking at me. I didn't mind, provided he was now willing to call it even.

He was going on. "Plainly there was no other alternative, so I came to supersede him; and now that I am here I refuse to employ the puerile stratagem that Mr. Lewent and Mr. Goodwin were determined to try. They should have known that their pretended concern about a large sum left secretly by Mr. Lewent's sister with one of you to be passed to him at her death–they should have known that none of you would take it seriously." He looked at Huck. "You, sir, even assumed that it was merely a blackmailing device, didn't you?"

"I thought it possible." Huck, being a millionaire, was giving no ground for a suit for slander. "You say it was a stratagem?"

"Yes." Wolfe flipped a hand. "Let's dismiss it. Slithering around looking for cracks is not to my taste. I'd much rather be forthright and tell you straight that I came here to discuss murder."

There were noises, but not explosive. Paul Thayer's head jerked up. My private reaction was absolutely unfavorable. Since he had blurted it out, a call to the police was in order right now, and exactly where would I be?

"Murder?" Huck was disbelieving his ears. "Did you say murder?"

"Yes, sir, I did." Wolfe was at a disadvantage. Working on an audience in his office, it wasn't difficult to keep all the faces in view; but here they made almost half a circle, with Huck in his wheelchair in the center, and Wolfe had to keep turning his head and moving his eyes. "There's no point," he declared, "in going on with the rigamarole started by Mr. Goodwin. I much prefer the directness and vigor of Mr. Lewent's original suggestion when he called at my office this morning to hire me. He suggested that Mr. Goodwin should come here and tell you that he, Lewent, suspected that one of these three women had murdered his sister, poisoned her, and that he had engaged me to investigate. I now propose–"

This time the noises could be called explosions, especially the one contributed by Mrs. O'Shea. Also she moved. She bounced out of her

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chair and started for the door, and when Wolfe sharply demanded where she was going and she didn't stop, I dived across and headed her off. White-faced, she ordered me, "Get out of my way! The dirty little rat!"

I held the pass. Wolfe's voice came. "If you're going for Mr. Lewent, madam, I beg you to consider. He came to me and paid me money because he lacked the spunk to tackle this himself. You can drag him in here, and the three of you can screech and scratch, but what good will it do? I'm willing to try to work this out, but not in pandemonium."

She turned and took a step.

"You should all realize," Wolfe told them, "what the situation is. You may think that this notion of Mr. Lewent's is preposterous, that he is in effect deranged, but that doesn't dispose of it or him. If he clings to it and speaks of it, it can become extremely ugly for all of you. Suing him for slander might settle him, but it wouldn't settle the stench. From the fact that he chose me to investigate for him, and from his paying me in advance what was for him a substantial sum, I assume that he has high regard for my sagacity, judgment, and integrity. If I am convinced that his suspicions are baseless and unmerited, I think I can persuade him to abandon them; and it may be that you can convince me here and now. Do you want to try?"

Paul Thayer threw his head back and haw-hawed. It didn't go over as well as it had when he and I were together in his room. They all looked at him, not admiringly, and when he subsided they transferred the looks to Huck. He was regarding Wolfe thoughtfully.

"I am wondering," he said, "if it would help for me to have a talk with my brother-in-law."

"No, it wouldn't," Sylvia Marcy said so positively that everyone glanced at her in surprise. Immediately she cooed. "I just mean," she cooed, "that he's a case. He is definitely a case."

Huck looked at Dorothy Riff. "What do you think?"

She didn't hesitate. The gray-green eyes were alert and determined. "I would like to know what it would take to convince Mr. Wolfe." She looked at him.

"That depends," Wolfe told her. "If, for instance, the source of the poison that killed Mrs. Huck has been satisfactorily established, and if none of you was connected with it in any way, I would be well on the road to conviction. According to Mr. Lewent, it was ptomaine, and all of you were on the premises at the time. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

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"Good God," Paul Thayer protested, "you don't really mean it! You're actually going to ask us?"

"I'll ask you, Mr. Thayer, since you are not suspected by Mr. Lewent. Where did Mrs. Huck die? Here?"

Thayer looked at Huck. "What about it, Uncle Theodore? Do you want me to play?"

Huck nodded slowly. "I suppose so. Yes."

"Whatever you say." Thayer looked at Wolfe. "My aunt died in this house, in her bed, just about a year ago."

"Were you here?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it. Just tell it, and I'll ask questions as required."

"Well." Thayer cleared his throat. "It was my uncle's birthday, and there was a little celebration here in this room. We were all here, we who are here now, and a few other people, four or five–old friends of my aunt and uncle. Do you want to know who they were?"

"Later, perhaps. Now just the event."

"We had drinks and things, and afterward a buffet dinner served in this room, plenty of wine–my aunt liked wine, and so does Uncle Theodore–finishing up with champagne, and some of us were fairly high, including me. In fact I finally got slightly objectionable, so my aunt said, and I left before the party broke up and went up to my room and made music. Did you ever play the piano while you were lit?"

Wolfe said no.

"Try it sometime. By the way, will you kindly tell me something? Why did one of these women poison my aunt? What for?"

"Speaking for Mr. Lewent, because she was on intimate terms with your uncle and wanted to marry him. Where there is room for a deed there is always room for a motive. That can–"

"You dare!" Mrs. O'Shea blazed. She was back in her chair.

"No, madam, I don't. I am only trying to learn if there is any cause for daring. Go on, Mr. Thayer?"

Thayer shrugged. "At some hour I quit making music and went to bed. In the morning I was told that my aunt had died, and the way it was described to me–it was quite horrible."

"Who described it?"

"Miss Marcy, and Mrs. O'Shea some."

Wolfe's eyes moved. "You saw it then, Miss Marcy?"

"Yes, I did." She was not cooing. "To say that one of us poisoned her, that's terrible."

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"I agree. What did you see?"

"I was sleeping on the floor above this, and so was Mrs. Huck. She came and got me up; she was in great pain and didn't want to disturb her husband. I got her back to bed and called a doctor–it was after midnight–and I got Mrs. O'Shea, but there wasn't much we could do until the doctor came. It was a question about telling Mr. Huck–he couldn't even go in the room where she was, because the door was too narrow for his chair, but of course we had to tell him. She died about eight o'clock."

Wolfe went to Huck. "Naturally there was some inquiry–a death under those circumstances."

"Certainly." Huck was curt.

"Was there an autopsy?"

"Yes. It was ptomaine."

"Was the source identified?"

"Not by analysis." A spasm ran over Huck's face. He was having a little trouble with the controls. "Before dinner there had been a large assortment of hors d'oeuvres, and among them was a kind of pickled artichoke which my wife was very fond of. No one else had taken any of them, and apparently she had eaten them all, since there were none left. Since no one else was ill, it was assumed that the ptomaines, which were definitely present, had been in the artichokes."

Wolfe grunted. "I'm not a ptomaine scholar, but this afternoon I looked them up a little. Do you know how thoroughly the possibility of the presence of a true alkaloid was excluded?"

"No. I don't know what you mean."

"Isn't ptomaine an alkaloid?" Dorothy Riff asked.

"Yes," Wolfe conceded, "but cadaveric. However, for that there is the record. You were here the night of Mrs. Huck's death, Miss Riff?"

"I was here for the party. I left around eleven o'clock."

"Did you know that she was fond of pickled artichokes?"

"We all did. It was a kind of standing joke."

"How did you know that ptomaines are alkaloids?"

She flushed a little. "When Mrs. Huck died I read up about them."

"Why? Was there something about her death or about the artichokes that made you suspect something?"

"No! Of course not!"

Wolfe's head went right and left. "Did any of you suspect that Mrs. Huck's death was not accidental?"

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He got a unanimous negative with no abstentions, but he insisted, "Have any of you felt, at any time, that the possibility of foul play was insufficiently explored?"

Unanimous again. Mrs. O'Shea snapped, "Why should we feel that if we didn't suspect anything?"

Wolfe nodded. "Why indeed?" He leaned back, cleared his throat, and looked judicious. "I am impressed, naturally, by the total absence of any currents of mistrust among you. Three women like you–young, smart, alive to opportunity, inevitably competitive in a household like this–are ideal soil for the seeds of suspicion if there are any around, but evidently none have sprouted in you. That is more than indicative, it is almost conclusive, and I could not expect, here in an hour or so, to reach the haven of certainty. It would be unreasonable to challenge you to convince me utterly; the law itself assumes innocence until guilt is demonstrated; and that leaves us only with the question, how much is it worth to you to have me employ my talent and energy to persuade Mr. Lewent that his suspicions are unfounded, and to keep him persuaded? Shall we say one hundred thousand dollars?"

They were unanimous again, this time with gasps. Miss Riff, quickest to find words, cried, "I told you it was blackmail!"

Wolfe showed them his palms. "If you please. I am indifferent to what you call it, blackmail or brigandage, but it would be childish for you to suppose I would perform so great a service for you as a benefaction. My spring of philanthropy is not so torrential. The sum I named would surely not be exorbitant. I'll be considerate on details; I don't even insist on an I.O.U.; it will be sufficient if Mr. Huck will state, all of us hearing him, that he guarantees payment of the full amount to me within one month. With one provision, which I insist on, that no word of this arrangement ever reaches Mr. Lewent. On that I must have explicit and firm assurance. I require the guarantee from Mr. Huck because I know he is good for it and I know nothing of the financial status of any of the rest of you, and of course it is to his interest as well as yours that Mr. Lewent should be persuaded that his suspicions are unfounded."

He took them in. "Well?"

"It's blackmail," Miss Riff said firmly.

Paul Thayer muttered, "Lewent picked a lulu when he picked you."

Miss Marcy and Mrs. O'Shea were silent. They were looking at Huck, obviously wanting a lead. Huck, his head cocked to one side,

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was frowning at Wolfe, studying him, as if in doubt whether he had heard correctly.

He spoke. "What makes you think," he asked, "that you can manage my brother-in-law?"

"Mainly, sir, my self-conceit. I undertake it, and I too am financially responsible. You guarantee to pay, and I guarantee to deliver. You guarantee to pay me one hundred thousand dollars within one month, and I guarantee that Mr. Lewent will not again accuse any person here present of serious misconduct prior to this moment; and if he does so, I forfeit the entire amount paid me."

"Is there a time limit to your guarantee?"

"No."

"Then I accept it. I guarantee to pay you one hundred thousand dollars within one month, as consideration for the guarantee you have given, as stated by you. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly. Now the provision. It is understood by all of you that no word of this arrangement is ever to get to Mr. Lewent. You agree that you will give him no hint of it either directly or indirectly. To indicate your agreement please raise your hands."

Mrs. O'Shea's hand went up first, then Miss Marcy's, then Miss Riff's. Wolfe asked, "Mr. Huck?"

"I thought it unnecessary. Certainly I agree."

"Mr. Thayer?"

With all eyes on him, Paul Thayer looked highly uncomfortable. He glanced at his uncle. "Oh, nuts," he said, and raised both hands as high as they would go.

"Then that's settled." Wolfe made a face. "Now I must go to work, and I must have your help. First I'll speak with Mr. Lewent privately, but it may be that after a preliminary I'll want to bring him in here for a brief colloquy. So you will please remain here a while–not long, I think." He got to his feet. "Archie, you said Mr. Lewent is in his room on this floor?"

I was a little tardy answering and moving because I was trying to see all their faces at once as they heard that we were going for Lewent. But Wolfe repeated my name, and I was up and with him, detouring around him to get to the door and open it. I led the way to Lewent's room, opened that door too, and entering, flipped the wall switch for light and then stepped over Lewent's legs to get out of the way for Wolfe to come in. He did so, shut the door, and stood looking down at his client.

"Lift him so I can see the back of his head."

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That was no great strain, considering the size of the corpse and the fact that it was fairly stiff by then. When Wolfe finished his inspection and straightened up, I lowered it to the rug again, to its former position.

"As you know," Wolfe said, "it is regarded as undesirable to leave a corpse unguarded, especially when violence is indicated. I'll stay here. You will go and tell them what we have found, instructing them to remain together in Mr. Huck's room, and then call the police."

"Yes, sir. Call from Huck's rooms or go down to the study?"

"Either. As you choose."

"When the cops go into details with me, does my memory fail me anywhere besides my one trip to this room?"

"No. Everything else as it was."

"Including the way I got up here?"

"Yes. Confound it, go."

I went.

It had been twenty minutes to ten when Wolfe and I had left the gathering in Huck's room to go and have a talk with our client. It was a quarter past twelve, more than two and a half hours later, that we were in Huck's room again with a gathering–the same cast of characters with a few additions.

Meanwhile some two dozen highly trained city employees, including a deputy police commissioner and two assistant district attorneys, had put on an expert performance in the house that Herman Lewent's father had built and that Herman had after all managed to die in. I witnessed very little of the performance, since for most of the 155 minutes I was up in the sewing room answering questions and explaining previous answers, but I knew it was expert because I had seen most of them in action before.

In one way at least it was too damn expert to suit me, because at a couple of points I wouldn't have minded a chance to exchange a few words with Wolfe, but I wasn't allowed to. We were expertly kept apart, and I had no sight or sound of him between nine forty-five, when I left him guarding the corpse, and twelve fifteen, when Sergeant Purley Stebbins, who has called me Archie eight times over the years in fits of absent-mindedness, came up to the sewing room for me and escorted me down to Huck's room.

It was the same cast of characters, but they were visibly the worse for wear. Huck himself, in his chair, still in the maroon tie and

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jacket, looked so pooped that I was surprised the official brass wasn't showing more consideration for a guy in his bracket whose bum legs gave them such a good excuse. It seemed likely that Paul Thayer had shown some temperament which required a little handling, since his tie was crooked and his hair mussed and a dick was standing at his elbow. On the whole the three women were apparently taking it a little better than the men, but they were by no means jaunty. Mrs. O'Shea sat stiff, her cold blue eyes directed at Inspector Cramer, who was seated near Wolfe. She didn't bother to glance at Purley and me as we entered. And damned if Miss Riff and Miss Marcy weren't holding hands! They were side by side on a couch, sharing it with Assistant D.A. Mandelbaum and Deputy Police Commissioner Boyle.

I had to hand it to Wolfe. He had the big chair he had had before, and this time I hadn't been there to nab it for him. And he didn't look fagged. As I came into range and caught his eye, I thought, oh-oh, here we go. I knew that look well. He was about to make some fur fly, or thought he was.

He snapped at me, "Archie!"

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down. I have told Mr. Cramer I want to go home, and as an inducement have offered some comments on this affair, insisting on your presence. You have of course answered all questions and given all the information you have."

"Yes, sir."

"So have I. Move your chair–it obstructs my view of Mr. Thayer. That's better. Mr. Cramer, I could have done this much earlier–indeed, immediately after your arrival–but you were not then ready to listen, and besides, there was the possibility that your men would uncover something that would weaken or even negate my assumptions. I don't know that they haven't, so I need to ask a few questions."

Inspector Cramer's round red face was not sympathetic. He rasped, "You didn't say you had questions, you said you had comments. You practically said you know who killed Lewent."

"I do, unless you know better. That's all my questions are for. Are you ready to charge anyone?"

"No."

"Have you found a weapon that satisfies you?"

"No."

"Have you any evidence that would contradict an assumption that

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Lewent was killed elsewhere and his body was transported to his room and dumped there?"

"No."

"Have you evidence pointing to any other place in this house as the spot where he was killed?"

"No."

"Have you for any reason, evidential or speculative, excluded any of these people from suspicion?"

"No."

Boyle cut in from the couch. "How long do you intend to let this go on, Inspector?"

"You could have stopped it before it started," Wolfe said dryly. "But here's a comment. It is close to unbelievable that Lewent was killed where he was found. From such a blow he died instantly, and surely it was not struck in that narrow passage, particularly since it was moving upward at the moment of impact. With no sign of any struggle, with no displacement of the rug even, I can't believe that such a blow could be struck–"

"Skip it," Cramer growled. "Neither can we."

"You think he was killed elsewhere?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know where?"

"No."

Mandelbaum exploded, "What do you think this is, Wolfe, twenty questions?"

Wolfe ignored him. "My second comment. If he was killed elsewhere, why was the body moved? Because the murderer didn't want it found where it was. How was it moved? That's the real question. For vertical transport there was the elevator, but to and from the elevator, how? Was it dragged? That would leave marks, and of course you have looked for them. Have you found any?"

"No."

"Then it wasn't dragged. Carried? By whom? None of these women would be up to it. Lewent was undersized, but he weighed more than a hundred pounds. By Mr. Huck? It has been established that his legs will take him, with no burden, only a few steps. Then Mr. Thayer? He's all we have left, but why? That's another question I must ask you, Mr. Cramer. Why did Mr. Thayer kill Mr. Lewent?"

"I don't know."

"Have you even a decent surmise?"

"At present no."

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"Neither have I. But there's another reason for excluding him, at least provisionally–that he's not a lunatic. Only a lunatic would carry the body of a man he had just murdered up and down these halls at that time of day, with so great a probability of being seen. No, I think we may conclude that the body was neither dragged nor carried. It only remains–"

"By God!"

That was me. It popped out. It is not often that I let myself interrupt Wolfe when he has steam up and is rolling, but that time it hit me so hard that I didn't even know I was speaking. Eyes came to me, and Wolfe turned his head to inquire, "What is it, Archie?"

I shook my head. "I'll save it."

"No, we're through saving. What is it?"

"Nothing much, only that I suddenly realized that I actually saw the murderer in the act of transporting the corpse. I stood and looked straight at him while he was moving it, and we exchanged words. I don't like to brag, but don't you agree?"

"Yes, I think it likely–"

"This is one hell of a time to realize it," Sergeant Stebbins blurted at me.

"I suggest," Wolfe told him, "that you post yourself near Mr. Huck. He could have almost anything hidden around that chair, especially under that quilt, and I don't–"

"Just a minute, Wolfe." Mandelbaum had left the couch and was marching. "If you have any evidence against anyone, including Mr. Huck, we want to hear it or see it first."

"This is the man," Huck said in a voice not very steady, "who tried to extort one hundred thousand dollars from me!"

"And succeeded," Wolfe declared. "I'm by no means sure I couldn't collect, though–"

He stopped, startled. So was I, and the others. Purley Stebbins, who knew Wolfe from away back, had quietly moved to Huck's chair, at his right elbow, and all of a sudden Huck had jerked his head around and snarled at him in a spasm of fury, "Get away!" It was such a nasty snarl that Mandelbaum, also startled, forgot about Wolfe to stare at Huck. Purley, who had been snarled at by experts in his day, was unmoved.

"I offered comments, not evidence," Wolfe reminded them. "Here is one regarding the location and nature of the wound on Mr. Lewent's head, and the direction of the blow. Suppose I am Mr. Huck; here I am in my wheelchair, in my study. It is shortly before five

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in the afternoon, and my brother-in-law, Mr. Lewent, is with me. I have decided that he must die because I believe that he is a deadly menace to me. He has engaged Nero Wolfe, a detective who does not waste his time or talent on inanities, to start an investigation in my household on a pretext so absurd that it is manifestly a fake. I not only know that my wife would not have left a sum of money secretly to be given to her brother; I also know that he knows she would not have done that. In addition, Wolfe's assistant, Goodwin, in talking with my secretary and housekeeper and nurse, has dwelt on the possibility that one of them poisoned my wife, pretending that he is merely being facetious. One of them has told me about it. You might check that detail by inquiry."

"We have," Cramer admitted. "It was Miss Riff."

"Good. So I am convinced that my brother-in-law has become suspicious about his sister's death and therefore mortally threatens me. For the purpose of this comment let us say the threat is possible disclosure of the fact that I poisoned his sister–my wife–by putting toxic material into a dish of artichokes. The inducement, which I realized, was inheritance of her wealth, amounting to millions. By the way, I don't suppose Mr. Huck can prove that Mr. Lewent did not come to his study between four and five o'clock?"

"No. He sent Miss Riff for him about half-past four. He says Lewent was with him about ten minutes and then left."

"Was Miss Riff present?"

"No. She left the house on an errand."

Wolfe nodded. "Good again. And in fairness to you, Mr. Cramer and gentlemen, it should be said that I have had one big advantage which you lacked. You haven't seen Mr. Huck propel himself in that vehicle, have you?"

They said no.

"I haven't either, but I have heard Mr. Goodwin describe the operation and was impressed. It was my memory of that description that put me on the path of these comments. At present Mr. Huck does not look as if he would care to demonstrate his machine, but you can manage that later. To go back: I am now Mr. Huck, here in my chair in my study, shortly before five o'clock." Wolfe pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wadded it in his right hand. "This is a paperweight, a heavy ball of green marble with a segment sliced off. Actually it isn't in my hand, not quite yet; I merely have it ready, here on a shelf of my chair, holding down some papers. Archie, you are Mr. Lewent. Stand there in front of me, please–of

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course you could be either standing or sitting. A little closer would be more natural. Now I lift the paperweight with my right hand, and with my left pick up a paper to show you, but it slips from my fingers and falls to the floor. It's quite likely that before sending for you I practised dropping that paper. Of course you bend over to retrieve it for me–that would be automatic, with me a cripple–and when you do so I strike with the paperweight."

I bent over, and he tapped me on the nape. I wasn't in the mood to ham it by dropping dead, but it didn't seem fitting to straighten up immediately, so I compromised by sinking to a knee.

"God save us," muttered Mrs. O'Shea, and there was no other sound.

Wolfe went on. "In our relative positions, me sitting and you stooping, the impact would be upward on your skull. I must now move as fast as my disability will permit. Twenty seconds is enough to satisfy me that no second blow is needed; you are dead. I am sound and strong from the hips up, and in another twenty seconds I have you lifted and draped over my legs and covered with the shawl that I am never without. I push a button and grasp the lever, and off we go. I must dump you on another floor. It is a risk, certainly, but I must take it."

"Evidence, damn it," Mandelbaum growled.

"By all means," Wolfe conceded, "and the sooner the better. You might start by learning if the paperweight fits the dent in the skull; I think you'll find that it does. Examine the plaid shawl that was used for a shroud; you may find hairs of Lewent's head. You had already concluded that the murder was not committed in Lewent's room; I challenge you to explain how the body was transported if not on Mr. Huck's chair. I confess it is a pity that the day was dying and the light in the hall was dim when Mr. Goodwin stood at the door of Lewent's room and saw Mr. Huck, in his chair, emerge from the elevator and head for his room. Mr. Goodwin has sharp eyes, and in better light he would probably have noticed that the hump under the shawl was larger than it should have been. Of course his presence forced Mr. Huck to retreat to his own room with his cargo temporarily, but Mr. Goodwin left almost at once–left the house to phone me–and Mr. Huck finished the transport. That must have been the hardest part for him, since the door to Lewent's room was too narrow for his chair."

Wolfe tilted his head to Mandelbaum, who was still standing. "But I like this for evidence. To me, in fact, this alone is absolutely

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conclusive. You have questioned all of us at length, and you know what was said in this room immediately prior to the discovery of the body. You know that in the presence of five witnesses I extorted from Mr. Huck a promise to pay me a large sum of money–for what? For my reciprocal promise that Mr. Lewent would not again pester any of them with accusations! It is inconceivable that Mr. Huck could be such an ass as to agree to any such bargain if he had thought Lewent was still alive. Word of it, from Mr. Thayer if no one else, was sure to reach Lewent, and he, thinking I had betrayed him by taking a bribe from the enemy, would have had his suspicions redoubled instead of stilled."

Wolfe shook his head. "No. Unquestionably Huck knew then that Lewent was dead; that certainty struck me the moment I saw the corpse. Not only that; by agreeing to my preposterous proposal Huck was confessing to his guilt. He thought I was blackmailing him, and, momentarily at least, he thought he had to submit. I had tackled him before witnesses, and he would have to get me alone to find out how much I knew and how I might be dealt with. But for the terror of his guilt, he would have scorned me as a witling; when I made my proposal and demand, he would have sent for his brother-in-law and denounced me to him. Instead–but you know what he did, and look at him now."

Most of those present did look at him, but three did not, and it went to show how men's minds work. The three were Assistant District Attorney Mandelbaum, Deputy Police Commissioner Boyle, and Inspector Cramer. They, three high-ranking officers of the law, were gazing resentfully and indignantly, not at the murderer who had just been exposed, but at the man who had exposed him. Not that you could blame them much. They would have to charge Huck and take him, that was clear, but they were by no means ready for a judge and jury; and Huck had enough dough to hire the ten best lawyers in town.

Cramer rose to his feet, shot a glance to his right to make sure Sergeant Stebbins was standing by, and moved to plant himself in front of Wolfe.

"Yeah, look at him now," he growled, "and look at you! You and your helpful comments! That bargain you offered him–you say it's inconceivable that he could have been such an ass as to agree to it if he had thought Lewent was still alive. Okay, but what about you? It's also inconceivable that you could have been such an ass as to offer it if you had thought Lewent was still alive. God knows I could

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call you plenty of things, but not an ass. That stunt Goodwin pulled to get you up here–don't try to tell me he would have pulled it, or that you would have come, if you hadn't both known Lewent had been murdered! I want a comment on that!"

"Pfui," Wolfe said mildly. "Don't you think you have enough on your hands without–"

He stopped to watch a performance, and this time it went to show how women's minds work. Mrs. O'Shea was on her feet and moving, slowly as if in a trance, toward her employer, with tears streaming from her eyes and down her cheeks, and her arms crossed on her chest. She stopped three steps short of him.

"This is from heaven," she said, in so low a voice that she could barely be heard. "The terror in my heart–oh, God, so long! You lied to me, and somewhere in me I knew it all the time! She did find out about us–she found out and told you so, and you killed her. Thank heaven, oh, thank heaven–"

Inspector Cramer was there and had her elbow. Another woman's mind was working too. Sylvia Marcy left the couch, walked across through the group to the wheelchair, and placed an object on Theodore Huck's lap, on top of the maroon quilt. It was after she had moved away and started for the door that I saw what the object was–a wristwatch with a ring of red stones, maybe rubies.

I can't report on the fate of the other two gifts whose presentation had been precipitated by my presence. Months have passed, and only last week a jury convicted Theodore Huck of first-degree murder, but as far as I know Mrs. O'Shea and Miss Riff still have their watches.

"Q"

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"There was no question that F. Eagle Fielding was some sort of con artist. But what was his game?" . . .

CATTLE CALL

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"It seems rather short notice." Delroy Dietz was sitting in his swivel chair, tipped well back with his alligator shoes propped on the desk. In one hand he held a typewritten letter and in the other one-half of a thousand-dollar bill. The letter had made him curious. The cropped banknote was causing palpitations inside Dietz's barrel chest.

Micheline Potvin, Dietz's secretary and long-time girl friend, sat on the other side of the desk considering the message which her employer had just read aloud. "Wants you there this afternoon at two?" she said. "He's got a hell of a nerve."

"Yes," Dietz said. "But he also has the other half of this one-grand note. For that I don't mind changing my schedule a little."

"A little?" Micheline sniffed. It was their day to have the long lunch at L'Oiseau Bleu, sitting on soft upholstery in semidarkness behind martinis in goblets as big as punchbowls, emerging once in a while to collect a plate of salmon and turkey and various salads from the buffet.

Dietz remembered what day it was. "I'm with you, Mich," he said. "I hate cutting short our lunch. But just think." He waved the neutered money. "By the end of the afternoon I'll have a thousand bucks. Think of the dinner we can have."

"I'm thinking of the long boots I need," she said.

"Yes, think of them. No reason not to think of them." Dietz looked again at the letter. It was addressed to Delroy Dietz, Esq., Manager, Television Production, K & K Advertising, Montreal. And it was signed *F. Eagle Fielding*. "Have you ever heard of this Fielding guy?" he said.

Micheline was good at remembering important names, but this was a new one on her. "Never," she said. "What's the address again? England?"

1979 by William Bankier.

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"Interlab Promosales, London." Dietz had an ear for the magic of corporate syllables. He pronounced these with reverence. "I wonder what he's got in mind for me?"

At two o'clock the Mt. Royal Hotel's mezzanine floor was a busy place outside Suite 1103. Dietz and Micheline, inadequately fortified with gin and salmon, stood in a line that included the chief broadcasting executives from most of the ad agencies in town. They all wore the furtive expression of men being photographed while robbing a bank. Others besides Dietz had their secretaries with them and the ladies looked as competitive as early arrivals at a one-day sale.

Nearing the head of the queue, Dietz saw a familiar face; it was Rachel Rachmanoff and she seemed to be in charge.

"Do you see what I see?" Micheline whispered. "What's ACTRAP got to do with this?" The Rachmanoff girl was secretary of the Montreal chapter of the Association of Canadian Television and Radio Performers.

"I don't know. But it shows Fielding must have some TV production in mind." Dietz sounded preoccupied. He was watching the men ahead of him. Each one was holding one-half a thousand-dollar bill. Rachel was taking possession of them, clipping to each fragment a slip of paper bearing the executive's name.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dietz," the ACTRAP secretary said. "I'm glad you could come on such short notice."

"I hope it's worthwhile," Dietz said. "I canceled a meeting with the Emperor of Allied Oil."

"Oh, I think Mr. Fielding has something better than that for you," Rachel said. Deft fingers snatched the piece of currency from Dietz's grasp. "While you're in the meeting," Rachel explained, "I'll be busy with cellulose tape, mating this up with its other half. Mr. Fielding will tell you all about it."

It was not a well-organized meeting. There were no tables with green baize covers, no pitchers of ice water and rows of glasses turned upside down, no pads of paper with sharpened pencils—none of the props that made Delroy Dietz feel secure. He found himself in an ordinary hotel salon with six chairs to accommodate two dozen people. Executives in the 50-grand bracket were reduced to sitting on sofa arms or leaning against walls like freshmen on registration day. Three ashtrays were being passed sheepishly from hand to hand.

To make matters worse, the room was hot and nothing happened

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at the appointed time. After twenty minutes one of them said, "What happened to Rachmanoff?" She had disappeared with the money.

The forty-five-minute mark came and went with no sign of F. Eagle Fielding. People made unruly noises, but nobody wanted to leave until those banknotes were pasted together. It was a unique scene. These were men who controlled people–actors, technicians, writers–ordered them here and there, made them wait, changed their work, treated them like children. Now they themselves were sitting here at loose ends, summoned by a mysterious stranger. They felt diminished, unsure of themselves, and given another half hour of this treatment there would not be enough confidence left among them to light up a smile.

Delroy Dietz had the added misery of Micheline Potvin looking at him reproachfully from beneath a couple of dollars worth of eye shadow. He roused himself and began to say, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I–"

A door opened at the end of the salon and in came a man who had to be Fielding. He might have been tall except that he walked bent almost double, supporting himself on a short cane. This posture presented first a thick head of snow-white hair surmounting a florid face divided by a lush white mustache of the regimental variety. When he looked up, he stared fiercely out of one blue eye; the other was covered by a patch of black cloth. His dark-blue pin-stripe suit, white shirt, and striped tie all suggested Savile Row.

"Sorry to be late," he shouted in a parade-square voice. "The Brigadier came through on the blower from London and I had to listen. I've been listening to the Brigadier since the war. I was his Regimental Sargeant Major. Followed him across North Africa, hot on the heels of Rommel and the Afrika Corps. Stopped a packed at Sidi Barani, turned me into the grotesque individual you see before you. Never mind."

Fielding turned to Rachel Rachmanoff and gave her an avuncular smile. "Did the young lady do the necessary with those bits of paper you brought with you?"

"I'm about to attend to it," she said.

"Good. The Brigadier wants none of you to go away empty-handed, even though only one can be chosen." He scanned the room with his solitary eye. "Let me put you in the picture. The Brigadier heads up a consortium of industrial and commercial interests on the other side of the pond. The big boys. The heavyweights. You may think Britain is a wasted power, but not so. The chaps with the money

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have simply withdrawn it from domestic investment because they won't cooperate with those who constitute our present government. But we've plenty to spend where there's profit to be made. And that's what we intend to do in North America, starting with a test market here in Canada."

Throats were cleared and feet shuffled. A test market means immediate money and the promise of more.

"I can't give you the details–top secret. But the product will find a place in every home in North America. The purpose of the exercise today is for me to have a short chat with each of you. In the next room I have a videotape camera and recording machine. The Brigadier–who will make the final selection–is a great judge of men. He will view the tape back in London, or in Zurich or Balmoral or wherever I can catch up with him. The man he selects will be in charge of directing the introductory TV film for the new product launch. His fee for the job will be one hundred thousand dollars."

The executives avoided each other's eyes.

"If the launch succeeds," Fielding continued, "there will be follow-up campaigns produced at similar fees by the candidate chosen today. Shall we proceed?"

Rachel Rachmanoff and the visitor left the room together. She reappeared moments later and selected the executive nearest the door to follow her in for the first interview. This routine was repeated at ten-minute intervals.

When Dietz's turn came, he was led into the adjoining room and found Fielding seated behind a table. The ACTRAP secretary joined him and the two of them smiled at Dietz encouragingly. He was not invited to sit down. They began to ask him questions about his experience and as he answered, Dietz noticed a man with a hand-held video camera. The interview was being taped. He remembered the countless times he had conducted what was known as the "Cattle Call"–cross-examining a parade of actors all auditioning for the same job. So this was how it felt.

The session lasted less than five minutes. At the end Fielding said, "Would you mind facing the camera and saying your name, age, height, and weight. This is important for the Brigadier, he insists on it. It helps him form a mental image of the complete man."

Dietz faced the camera. "Delroy Dietz," he said, enunciating clearly. "I'm forty-six years old. I'm six feet tall and I weigh one hundred and ninety-four pounds." He kept grinning at the lens until the light on the camera went out.

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As he left the room Rachel said, "If you don't mind waiting, Mr. Dietz, I'll have that thousand-dollar bill ready for you as soon as we've seen the others."

The room was as crowded at the end of the session as at the beginning. The last executive had been interviewed and now they were waiting for Miss Rachmanoff to reappear. Half an hour went by and the conversational rumble died away to be replaced by an inquiring silence. Finally Dietz got to his feet. "What the hell," he said as he went to the door, knocked, waited, then opened it.

The adjoining room was empty. No camera, no Rachel Rachmanoff, no F. Eagle Fielding. Dietz saw another door facing him. He crossed the room and flung the door wide. He was looking into the mezzanine corridor at startled guests walking by.

It took the offended executives several minutes to appreciate what had been done to them. Dietz found a telephone, called the desk, and established that there was no F. Eagle Fielding registered at the hotel. He was told the salon had been rented by the local office of ACTRAP.

While the others waited, Dietz dialed the ACTRAP office and was surprised when Rachel answered the telephone. She was astonished to hear they were still there. Mr. Fielding had sent her away an hour ago, saying he would distribute the thousand-dollar bills.

"Why us?" This was the question on the lips of the television executives as they straggled out of the Mt. Royal Hotel with the sun going down and an afternoon wasted. There was no question that F. Eagle Fielding was some sort of con artist. But what was his game?

In her office, as soon as she put down the telephone, Rachel Rachmanoff turned to Norman Hutchinson, local Montreal actor and president of ACTRAP, and the two of them laughed till they cried. The Fielding makeup and costume had been removed and Hutchinson was himself again. "I enjoyed that," Rachel said. "But won't they cause trouble for us now?"

"I doubt it," Hutchinson said. "They'll want to forget it. Making a fuss would only emphasize how gullible they were." There was an envelope in his pocket. He handed it to Rachel. "Better put this money back in the bank tomorrow. The Union funds have served their purpose."

Rachel put the cash away. "What about the amount we spent renting the salon and printing the Fielding letterheads? What shall I charge it up to?"

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"Christmas entertainment," Hutchinson said.

Rachel looked puzzled. "You've been so secretive about this," she said. "Not even I know what you're up to."

"Then I'll explain," he said. He took a sheet of paper and began writing on it as he spoke. "You remember how I got into trouble with Delroy Dietz last spring?"

"Of course. You went to one of his auditions. And after sitting around from one o'clock till five thirty with every other actor in Montreal, you blew your top."

"That's right. I told him he and the rest of the producers in town are insensitive clods. If they had any heart, they'd invite us to appear a few at a time. It might be less efficient for the agency but it would be a lot more humane for the actors."

"And the result is you've never been called by Dietz since then." Rachel smiled. "I'm beginning to see."

"It's simple. The invitation to the ACTRAP Christmas Party will include the following." He read from his notes. "Our party this year will feature a special entertainment on videotape. It stars the local community of television executives in a spectacular display of thousand-dollar smiles under the title, 'Cattle Call, or Hutchinson's Revenge'."

Rachel laughed, but she looked concerned. "It's a good gag," she said. "But once the word gets out, you'll never work in Montreal again."

"I know," Hutchinson said. "I'm moving to Toronto. I've landed a part in a thirty-nine-week series about retired soldiers. I play an old regimental sargeant major named F. Eagle Fielding."

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a *NEW* Schlock Homes story by

ROBERT L. FISH

Although some Sherlockophiles may disagree, we think this newest exploit of The Great Defective is one of his most triumphant cases—as brilliantly misdirected as a wrong address . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE COMMON CODE

by ROBERT L. FISH

It was rare, indeed, for my friend, Mr. Schlock Homes, to refer to his many adventures during the time he spent between the day he disappeared into that tavern in Switzerland and his return to London several years later. But on some occasions, when interesting cases were few, when his laboratory experiments resulted in undrinkable concoctions, or when the people in 221-A would pound on their ceiling at his violin concerti, he would speak of those by-gone days.

I recall in particular one blustery morning in late February in the year '76. Homes had but lately returned from a trip to the Iberian Peninsula where, at the behest of a nagging wife, he had gone to delve into the mysterious disappearance of a Spanish fisherman–a case I find in my notes as *The Adventure of the Juan Who Got Away*–and he now found himself at loose ends. The snow was piled deep in the street below, the wind was bitter, and for once Homes was content to remain in our snug quarters at 221-B Bagel Street and reminisce, rather than search out crime in the twisting warrens of Limehouse or Lincoln's Inn. With his dressing-gown wrapped around his gaunt figure, his chair drawn up before the blazing fireplace, and a Couffignal trailing smoke from between his stained fingers, he stared into the flames, while I hung on every word.

"It was a small coaster carrying soft drinks," he said, his voice low, his mind obviously reliving those harrowing days. "The *Glo-*

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rious Cott. It sank in Dire Straits, and the crew was fortunate enough to find several floats in the area, placed there without a doubt to mark the channel, and to which they clung in desperation. So tenaciously did they cling, in fact, that when we came to rescue them, we had a hard time separating the men from the buoys–"

It was at that moment, when I was intent upon hearing the end of his fascinating tale, that there came the sound of heavy footsteps upon the stairs, and a moment later the door opened to admit none other than Homes's brother, Criscroft. It was rare, indeed, for Criscroft Homes to appear at our quarters without prior notice, and rarer still when he forsook his niche at the Foreign Office in weather as beastly as we were suffering that day. He brushed aside our welcome, as well as the snow on his shoulders, and fell into the basket chair across from his brother.

"Schlock," he said heavily, "I fear the Government has need for your services once again."

"I am, as always, at your service," replied Homes at once, his fine eyes alight at the thought of a new challenge. "Pray tell me the cause of your concern."

"Yes," said Criscroft, and frowned into the fire a moment, putting his thoughts in order. Then at last he sighed mightily and swung his chair to face his brother.

"Schlock," he said, his deep voice vibrant with emotion, "as you may or may not know, our Postal Service has been having its difficulties of late. Not only has its income failed to cover its expenses, but its deficit has been increasing. Add to this the fact that its losses have also been substantial, and you can begin to understand the problem. Or," he added ominously, "a portion of the problem."

Homes tented his fingers and observed Criscroft over them queryingly. Criscroft nodded, as if in recognition of his brother's attention, and continued.

"Now," he said, "as if this triple confoundment were not enough, we have come across a scheme we believe aimed at using the Postal Service without payment. It is our considered opinion that this dastardly plot must be nipped in the bud, or there is no telling where it might lead."

"Bankruptcy?" I hazarded.

Criscroft paid me no heed. He reached into his inner jacket pocket, bringing forth several envelopes. He studied them for a few moments, his face dark with emotion, and then handed them across to his brother as he went on.

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"Those are standard envelopes, addressed to people in greater London from different locations throughout the world in the course of everyday business. Do not concern yourself either with the names or the street addresses; the people and their locations have been investigated in every detail–without their knowledge, of course–and have been found to be innocent of any involvement. The same is true of the senders of the letters. Yet, in every case someone has managed to use the envelopes to transmit a mysterious message in code, adding it blatantly to the cover after the legitimate postage has been paid, and in this manner saving himself monies which rightly belong to the Queen."

They both sprang instantly to their feet at mention of Her Majesty, but once they were re-seated, I came behind my friend's chair to study the envelopes in his hand over his shoulder. Surely enough, as Criscroft had stated, in each case someone had added a series of common but mysterious numbers and letters after the name of the city. The one on the first envelope, which I could not help but note had been sent from someone in Nottingham to someone in the City, had added to it the strange combination of: 2WC 6ST 3L. The second had been addressed to someone in St. Dunstans Hill, and in a handwriting remarkably similar to that of the letter-writer himself, someone had added the symbols: 2L 8FL 6G. The final envelope, which I noted had come from some place called Ohio in the colonies, had after the name of the city of London: 2J 4L 2W.

"Now," said Criscroft, while Homes continued to study the strange numbers and letters, "we in the Foreign Office have tried to consider all possible reasons why anyone would add such common numbers and letters to the envelopes. We have ruled out mere scribbling for the sake of mischief; we feel that not even the miscreants who are thus using the Postal Service for their own ends would stoop to such malevolence. No, there is a purpose in this malfeasance, and we must know that purpose, as well as those responsible!"

Homes nodded. "One thing is certain," said he, pinching his lip and then rubbing it briskly in an effort to reduce the pain, "the symbols could not have been placed on the envelopes at the instigation of the Postal Service itself."

"Of course," Criscroft said, agreeing. "That was evident at once."

"I do not understand!" I cried. "How can you be so sure?"

The two men considered me pityingly.

"There are only two possible reasons why the Postal Service would ask people to add symbols of any nature to addresses on envelopes,"

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Homes said in his insufferable, didactic manner. "Either to aid in making their deliveries more rapidly, or to make them more slowly. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I admitted a bit shamefacedly.

"But," he continued, one finger in the air–I assumed for emphasis–"to make the delivery faster cannot be in the best interest of the British Empire, or else it would have been done long since."

"And to use the mysterious code to make the service slower," said Criscroft, "would be in the nature of sending coals to Newcastle." He put me and my puerile comments out of mind and came to his feet, turning to his brother. "Schlock, I am sure you realise I would like to remain and solve this problem with you, but unfortunately to-day is Bingo at my club, and I have been honoured at being selected to call the numbers. I hope you understand."

"Of course!" said Homes warmly and also came to his feet, clasping his brother's hand. "I shall do my best to solve this code and be back to you as soon as possible."

Criscroft removed his watch from his waistcoat and consulted it. "But not before nine," he warned. "Our game does not end until then," and with a brief wave of his hand he clumped down the stairs and out into the snow.

Homes dropped back into his chair and placed the envelopes on the table before him, after which he tamped his pipe with Old Mephitis and lit up, sending clouds of smoke ceilingwards. He frowned down at the mysterious letters and numerals while I also studied them over his shoulder. Suddenly I had a thought.

"But, Homes," I said, "does this not seem a rather haphazard method of getting a message from one person to another? Would not a private messenger, or even the telegraph, be more reliable?"

"You do not understand," Homes said, shaking his head at me rather sadly. "The purpose of these rascals is to save money, not to spend it." He fell into a brown study, mumbling to himself, but audibly. "I should have suspected the finger in this pie of Professor Marty–the one they call, with reason, The Butcher–since I should have thought only his organisation to be large enough to cover all corners of the globe. But I have been reliably assured by Inspector Lastride that the Professor is no longer on the run, but has gone straight. He is now in the realty business. A pity, in a way. He was a formidable opponent, and made life interesting. Ah, well . . ."

He reached behind him for a reference book and took it down, but it apparently did little to help him solve the puzzle, for a moment

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later he had returned the volume to its place and in its stead took another from the shelf. Since I know that Homes, when he is in this mood, is apt to be uncommunicative for hours, I repaired to the sideboard and was about to experiment with the addition of sweet Vermouth to colonial whiskey–a concoction originally suggested, I believe, by a certain man, Hattan–when Homes looked up, the expression on his long face even colder than usual.

"Watney!" said he icily, his eyes boring into mine. "Why don't you go to your room? You know how I hate your fumbling around when I am trying to concentrate!"

"Fumbling?" I cried, hurt to the quick by the unfair accusation. "I picked out the Vermouth first shot!" But I had long since learned to read every nuance of Homes's tones, and felt it possible he wished me to leave him. Without another word I tucked the two required bottles under my arm and left the room.

It was late afternoon when I returned. The sun was beginning to hide its watery quality over the chimneypots of Bagel Street, and my experiments, while successful, required more material for the continuance. Homes was scribbling furiously on a bit of paper, and from the crumpled bits already littering the floor, and the acrid fumes that filled the room, it was evident he had not left his labours since my departure. As I entered he looked up, a faint smile on his face that indicated to me he had seen some rift in the previously insoluble problem.

"Watney!" he exclaimed, his fine eyes begging my pardon. "You must forgive me! My very good and old friend, you should know me and my moods by now. When I am in the midst of a problem that threatens to best me, I'm afraid I am quite impossible."

"Agreed," said I cordially.

"Or, at least, difficult."

"Impossible was closer, I believe," said I, after giving the matter some thought.

"We shall not argue the matter," he said a bit savagely. But then he brightened again. "However, the important thing is that I believe I have a strong hint as to the meaning of those cryptic symbols. As well," he added, "as a possible means of resolving the problem they represent."

"Homes!" I cried. "Congratulations!"

"Not quite yet," he said, and came to his feet. "First I must go out and verify my suspicions, but when I return it is possible I shall

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have need of your services again, Watney. There could be a slight chance of danger."

"How slight?" I asked.

"I should have my revolver handy," he said, "as well as having the fire-place poker at hand, if I were you. One never can tell."

With this remark he disappeared into his room to return a few minutes later. He had exchanged his deer-stalker for a ragged cap holding a jehu's badge, and was wearing a torn and wrinkled great-coat with patches on the elbows and held together at the front with large safety-pins; while on his feet were a tattered and scuffed pair of brogans missing several buttons. As has often been said, when Homes chose detection as his career, the stage lost a great wardrobe mistress. He paused at the sideboard to stuff a chutney sandwich into the pocket of his disreputable coat, and then moved to the door.

"Ta," he said bravely, and disappeared down the steps.

It was after seven o'clock when Homes returned. He came up the stairs with so sprightly a tread that I was sure he had confirmed whatever suspicions had driven him out into the cold. He shook the snow from his outlandish costume and disappeared into his room, and when he came out, wrapped comfortably in his old dressing-gown, I charged him with the fact. He acknowledged the accuracy of my conclusion with a broad smile, but it did not remain for long.

"I believe we shall be having a visitor shortly," said he, "and one who may well prove to be dangerous. You have your revolver ready?"

"As always, Homes," I said, tugging the weapon with some difficulty from an inner pocket where it had snagged on the lining.

"Good! And I shall seat myself here, within reach of the poker."

I replaced the revolver in the inner pocket, again with a bit of difficulty. "And now, Homes," I said, once the weapon had again caught in the lining, "I would be most appreciative if you would be so kind as to elucidate this most mysterious affair. Just what did the code say? And who are we awaiting at the moment?"

Homes chuckled.

"You may recall," said he, "that I remarked on Inspector Lastride's running on about Professor Marty no longer being involved in crime, but instead being a legitimate businessman dealing in real-estate properties? Well, as he usually is, Lastride was only half right. It is true that the professor is in real estate, but he is the same old professor for all that. In addition to saving money by using the Postal Service without payment, as Criscroft so accurately deduced,

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Professor Marty deals in slum properties, as low a profession as can be imagined!"

"Slum properties?" I asked, amazed. "How were you able to deduce that, Homes?"

"From the envelopes, of course." He reached around him and brought the three envelopes from the table, handing them to me one at a time. "I should have solved the problem sooner, had I considered the Professor and his present endeavour, but once I suspected his involvement it was fairly simple. This one, for example, sent from Nottingham and to which one of the professor's henchmen has added the notation: 2WC 6ST 3L. What do those strange numbers and letters suggest to you, Watney?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid, Homes," I replied honestly.

"Well," said he, "to be honest they meant little to me, as well, at first. But once I considered the possibility of Professor Marty's involvement, a brief trip to the location gave me the answer. It is a building in terrible shape. It has two water closets, is six storeys in height, and has exactly three lights–to wit, 2WC, 6ST, 3L. Most of the rooms are of the windowless type, long since outlawed by the Town Council, although such rules mean little to Professor Marty."

"But this second envelope, Homes?" I asked. "It says nothing that could be construed as meaning WCs, or storeys, or lights!"

"That also puzzled me at first, Watney," Homes admitted, "until I noted that it was addressed to St. Dunstans Hill, within a block of St. Mary's and the Bow Bells, and in the very heart of the cockney district. In that neighbourhood they never refer to a water closet except as a loo; they also refer to floors rather than storeys, and glass for windows. That, incidentally," he added, "was one of the worst of the slums; only two sanitary facilities for eight storeys!"

"But the third, Homes?" I asked, perplexed. "From this place called Ohio, in the colonies, if such a name can be accredited?"

"That," Homes admitted, "took me the longest time and I was about to abandon my theory of the solution to the various codes as common when I was fortunate enough to refer to my dictionary of colonial argot. It seems in the colonies they call a water closet a john–the dictionary merely states it, it does not explain it–even as they call storeys levels, although they still refer to the glassed opening in a wall as a window."

"Masterful, Homes!" I said in admiration. Then I remembered something else, my memory prodded by the prodding I was receiving from my revolver. "But who is this dangerous visitor we are ex-

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pecting? And what have you done to scotch his nefarious scheme?"

Homes's jaw tightened; his hand clutched the arm of his chair until the knuckles were white against the albescence of his skin.

"Watney, you should have seen the dismal hovels from which Professor Marty makes his living! Any step would be justified in protecting the Postal Service, as well as foiling the professor, and I have taken those steps. In addition to my own activities at Professor Marty's home, it was necessary to have the Bagel Street Regulars do a bit of breaking and entering; but as you know, where justice is concerned I always believe the end justifies the means. The Regulars have been instructed to discover many of the letters giving information useful to the professor and to change the conditions so that the properties will no longer appear so attractive to the fiendish Professor Marty!"

"Change the conditions?" I asked, confused.

"Exactly! If a building is described as having three water closets, in a total of eight storeys, say, and with only two windows–properties the professor would be in a hurry to buy and rent at exorbitant rates to poor souls–the Regulars are instructed to change the code so that it appears the building has, say, twelve water closets, is only three storeys tall, and has, say, eighteen windows." He smiled, but there was little true humour in the smile. "No, Watney, the professor will soon discover the source of his miserable rent gouging drying up!"

"But how are you certain it is the professor who is involved in this scheme?" I asked. "Have you traced the ownership of any of these properties to him?"

Homes considered me with disappointment.

"Watney, Watney! Of course I did not; it would have been totally unnecessary, and would have wasted precious time! But who else has a world-wide organisation and is also in real estate? It can only be Marty, and here, if I am not mistaken, is the professor now!"

The door opened and as Homes had so accurately predicted, the huge figure with the orange-coloured hair filled the doorway, a frown upon his face. I instantly reached for my pistol, struggling to remove it from my jacket lining, and finally succeeded. I clapped the pistol to the professor's head.

"Take heed!" I cried. "One move on your part and I shall fire!"

Professor Marty brushed me aside and turned to Homes.

"Homes," he said, and there seemed to be more sadness in his tone than the anger I had expected, "you have surpassed yourself! It seems you have finally gone over the edge! What on earth pos-

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sessed you to do what you did at my home? And leaving your calling card, yet! You can expect a bill for repairs!"

Homes smiled coolly.

"I only hope you have learned your lesson from my symbolic action, Professor," he said. "I might also mention that since it was obvious that postmen had to be your accomplices, a message has gone up on the bulletin board of the Postal Workers Union Headquarters, advising against further cooperation in your scheme. Go, now, and gouge no more."

Professor Marty turned to me, taking the pistol from my hand and absent-mindedly tucking it back into my jacket lining.

"I would suggest you keep your friend indoors, Doctor," he said heavily. "I think he's playing pinochle with a bridge deck." And with no further ado he turned and left the room.

It was obvious the professor was under some strain, since Homes was not playing cards at all, but was sitting quietly, smiling at the recently-closed door.

"Homes!" I said. "What on earth did you do at the professor's home that brought him here in this mood?"

Homes laughed aloud.

"What I did will make him think twice before he attempts any of his tricks on the Postal Service again," said he with a chuckle. "I poured glue in his letter-slot!"

It was the following morning and I was just pouring curried syrup over my chutney scones, when Homes appeared at the breakfast table. As he seated himself and began peeling a parsley, I hastily opened the morning journal and began searching for some possible case that might be of interest to my friend, for I knew his hatred of idleness. He looked at me queryingly across the table.

"There is this, Homes," I said, reading further into the article. "It seems that despite your excellent efforts of yesterday, the problems of the Postal Service appear still not to be completely resolved."

"No?" he inquired interestedly.

"Yes," I said. "It seems that the normal confusion of the postal system has somehow been compounded. Letters apparently destined for one postal zone are mysteriously being sent to another, and the result is havoc!"

"Then our job was only half done!" cried Homes, coming to his feet, his eyes flashing. "A letter to the authorities offering my services, if you will, Watney!"

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a *NEW* short story by

DAVID ELY

By this time you are well aware that David Ely's stories are never ordinary—indeed, most of them are extraordinary. You will find this newest one offbeat, thought-provoking—the story of a survival project in the middle of present-day Manhattan . . .

THE MARKED MAN

by DAVID ELY

It was early evening when he entered the Park. He headed for the darkest part, away from the lamps that lighted the pathways. He didn't see any other strollers, but he hurried all the same, not wanting to take chances.

When he reached the shelter of the first trees, he stopped and looked back toward the drive, even though he knew the car was no longer there. They had driven off as soon as they'd let him out. He'd been clapped on the shoulder—like the jump sign in a plane—and one of them had said, "Good luck, Major," and then he'd stepped out, with the weight of his flying suit dragging on him.

Good luck, Major. If he did have luck, those would be the last words anyone would address to him for four weeks.

He pulled back, startled. Someone had run past him, right past him, no more than a yard away—a man or boy running hard but with light steps in the direction of Fifth Avenue.

The Major squatted; his breath came quick, his pulse beat high. That had shaken him, whatever it had been—some college kid training for track, or some fellow running for the hell of it, or maybe a purse snatcher, and in that case there might be police on the way. The police were the ones he feared the most. The Agency had cleared things with the Commissioner, and the captains of the nearest pre-

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cincts had been informed, as a safeguard against publicity in the event he got caught, but of course the ordinary officer didn't know. Just one flash of a patrolman's torch could put an end to the project.

He had to avoid the lights. He'd had no idea there would be so many, not only the lamps along the pathways but also the automobile headlights on the drive that crossed the Park, and the big hotels and apartment buildings along its boundaries.

He kept moving through the trees, trying to shore up his confidence by physical activity. This first night would be the hard one. He knew that. If he managed this one, and the day to come, he'd probably be all right. He'd have to pick a hiding place that was far from where people normally went—away from the zoo, the lake, and the playing fields. He'd rather be caught by a policeman than by kids playing ball. If one of them got a glimpse of him, they'd all come shouting and pointing. He imagined a grotesque chase—a gang of boys pursuing a man made clumsy by the pilot's suit. They'd be yelling: *His head, his head. Look at his head.*

The head—that was the Agency's guarantee of his honesty. He couldn't cheat, not with that head. When they'd told him about it, he hadn't objected. He knew they were right. The project psychologist had talked to him for a long time about it. The object was to measure the psychological stress on a man hiding in the midst of a hostile population. If they could do that, then they could build a rescue program that made sense for the one pilot in twenty who'd been shot down but not captured, and had managed to hide somewhere—in a field, a bomb-blasted ruin, an abandoned apartment, anywhere he could find.

"You'll be that twentieth pilot, Major," the psychologist had told him. "You'll make it to the Park. Then you'll have to hide until you're rescued. But remember, you're a marked man. You're isolated from the people around you by the one thing you can't change—you can't speak the language. Well, for the purposes of this test, we can simulate almost anything but that. Nothing would prevent you from hiding that flying suit and swiping the pants off some Park tramp if you had to. Then you could just stroll over to the nearest bench to spend a quiet day reading the papers with nobody the wiser, and if some policeman came up to you, you could pass the time of day with him just as nicely as you pleased.

"Oh, we know you have no such intention, Major. We know you're determined to play this thing straight. But we also know that when a man is in a stress situation, even if it's a simulated situation, he

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may do things he wouldn't normally do. So you understand that we've got to protect the project. We've got to give you a handicap that's roughly the equivalent of loss of language. We've got to make you conspicuous in a way that's beyond your control."

And so they'd shaved his head and stained it green, a clear fresh green, green as new-grown grass.

The Major found a crevice between two boulders at the base of a small ridge. It was just wide enough for him to squeeze his body through. He worked for several hours in there with his entrenching tool hollowing out a cavity in the earth. He had stripped off his pilot's suit and laid it on the ground to hold the dirt he dug out. When he had a load, he gathered up the suit in his arms and carried it off, shaking it, so that the dirt was distributed over a wide area. Then from one of his pockets he took a small can—dog-repellent—and sprayed his entrance carefully.

The spring night was chill, but at least it wasn't raining. On a wet night he'd have left muddy prints and tracks all over. He was lucky, too, that it was mid-week, for there'd be fewer people in the Park during the day. It was the weekends that brought the crowds, and by the weekend he'd have his place improved or would have found a better one.

The night was ending. Dawn was on its way. He watched the sky lighten, and the trees and shrubs take shape. The cold mist was drifting where the ground was low. In the distance the skyscrapers blazed with red fire as the sun struck their crowns. He edged out of the crevice to examine the entrance one last time. There were no traces of his work. The grass was flattened where he had laid the flying suit, but it would rise again, and besides, the Park was full of places where kids had played and couples had spread blankets.

Then he saw his entrenching tool lying on open ground ten feet away. He crawled over and grabbed it, scuttled back, wedged himself through and inside, and lay there, breathing hard. That was worse than carelessness, he thought. The psychologist had warned him that he'd be his own worst enemy, that there'd be times when his fear would make traps for him, that there'd be a weakness in him that couldn't take the strain. He cursed himself, and spat in the dirt. Suppose he hadn't seen that tool and had left it there? Typical, he thought bitterly. He'd always forgotten something; he'd always fallen short. He'd tried to qualify for the space program, but he'd been rejected. He hadn't quite been up to the standards.

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But the project psychologist hadn't made it either, had he? The psychologist had been nosed out by psychologists who had just a little bit more on the ball. Yes, the Major thought, he and the psychologist were leftovers. They hadn't made the space team. They weren't quite good enough.

And maybe the project wasn't any better than they were. He had wondered about it already. True, it didn't look bad on paper. But suppose a man could survive undetected in the middle of Manhattan for four weeks—would that really produce much useful information for survival-and-rescue planning? Or was it just a flashy stunt dreamed up by some Operations lieutenant bucking for promotion?

Well, it wasn't his job to criticize the project. He was supposed to make it work—and he wasn't starting off very well. He hadn't made that hole long enough. He couldn't stretch out full length. Already his legs were cramping. He began massaging them. Weariness came on him, and hunger. He hadn't eaten since afternoon. He opened a can of rations, and ate with his fingers, then buried the can in the earth beside him, and put the sleeping mask on his face—it covered the mouth to muffle snoring—and settled back to wait out the day.

By nightfall he was in agony. His legs tormented him. He felt stifled by the mask. He kept falling into a dangerous kind of sleep where he twisted like an animal trying to burrow deeper, or maybe to burrow out into the air and sunlight, his traitor hands trying to rip off the mask, his legs threatening at any moment to go into a full screaming cramp.

The entire population of New York came, it seemed, to climb on his boulders and sit on the ridge above him. He heard voices, footsteps, shouts, laughter. At times unseen feet sent dirt sifting down. He cursed those who came. He feared them, he hated them. Yes, it was a definite reaction. He ought to remember to tell the psychologist. He could imagine what these people were from their voices—stupid kids and nagging mothers, and old men full of nastiness, and younger ones who had no business lounging around parks during the day. He was their prisoner. The least of them might find him, and turn him out to sunlight, like a mole. He clasped his knees tighter, and rocked his body to and fro, grinding his teeth to keep from crying out in pain and rage.

When darkness came, he stretched out at last, his head and shoulders thrust out of the hole and into the narrow space between the boulders. He slept until midnight, and woke in panic when the moon sent its light slicing through the crevice to fall on his upturned face.

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Then he worked, digging to make his burrow longer. After that he crawled about the area outside picking up candy wrappers, cigarette butts, and sandwich bags—why, he didn't know. Perhaps to wipe out every trace of the people who had tormented him all day.

He forced himself to walk off through the trees. He needed to stay away from his refuge until dawn. The psychologist had warned him he'd be tempted to keep too close to it for the safety it offered, until finally he might surrender to a compulsion to remain in it night and day.

He knew he would have to be careful. He was under unusual pressure: a man alone, fearing every hint of human presence—every voice, every movement, every sound—fearing the light of day most of all. True, it was a simulated situation. He could end it any time he chose. But that would be humiliating to his pride, and hurtful to his career. And he was a volunteer. He'd asked for it.

From one of his pockets he took a radio no larger than a pack of cigarettes. He could transmit three simple signals. The first meant: *I am here*. He sat at the base of a tree, holding the radio, studying the shadows that stretched toward the glow of the lamps along the pathways. At five-minute intervals he repeated: *I am here, I am here*. Somewhere someone was listening. He was in contact with another human being. But then he reasoned that the Agency would be unlikely to pay a technician to sit up night after night simply to monitor his signals. They'd have a machine record them. And the machine would answer him—yes, there it was, a return signal, barely audible.

The return signal meant: *We hear you*. He was heard, then, but only by a machine, and it wouldn't be until morning that they'd check to be sure their man in the Park had called in.

He wondered if the green head had been talked about. Probably. It was too ludicrous for the Houston people to keep quiet about. "Remember that gung-ho major who didn't make the space program? Well, guess where he is now. And guess what color his head is . . . That's right, I said his *head*."

He signaled again—*I am here*—just to hear the machine whisper back: *We hear you, we hear you*. Four weeks of this. They said they'd need that much time in a real situation, first to alert the nearest undercover agent that a flyer was down, and then to allow the agent to track down the signal, and finally, to work out a plan of escape.

He sent his second signal, a variation of the first. It meant: *I receive you*. And the machine dutifully replied: *We receive each other*.

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That was all. A few pulses through the ether, back and forth, meaningless to an enemy monitoring system, and then one day the *we hear you* would become more frequent, indicating that the agent was coming for him.

There was a third signal. *Emergency*. Which would mean he was sick or caught or couldn't stand it any more and was giving up.

I am here.

I receive you.

Emergency.

This was his vocabulary. This was all he had, he thought. He was just a green-headed man in a dirt-caked flying suit, sitting in a city park at night, talking without words to a machine he'd never see.

As the days went by, he deepened his burrow, made it more comfortable, more secure, better camouflaged. By night he explored the Park, studying each unknown reach of ground with care before venturing onto it. Whenever he passed the zoo, the animals sensed him, and stirred. It occurred to him that he was like them, in a way—a creature caged, and troubled by the scent of man.

Sometimes he saw others at night. He hid from them, drawing back in the deepest shadows. He had known he wouldn't be alone. The Agency people had told him he'd find himself among the scourings of New York—the weird ones, the oddballs, the misfits, the crazy men, all roaming the Park, hunting one another down. Well, he could take care of himself. He could handle two or three of them with judo and the knife. Besides, anybody who got a look at his head would run, for he was weirder than any of them, and more alone. Except that he would have just four weeks of it, and they were trapped for life. That was a difference; quite a difference.

They were frightened; so was he. They were hungry—and he'd be hungry, too. He didn't have enough rations for four weeks. The people at Houston had explained that they wanted him to live off the land—in part, anyway. That meant he would have to rummage through trash baskets looking for apple cores and sandwich leavings. If he had to, he could graze on grass, wild onions, daisies, and chew the bark of saplings. With care he might be able to stretch his rations. He had spent nine days in the Park already. There were nineteen to go, then. He could calculate how much he could allow himself to eat each day.

But of course a downed pilot wouldn't know how long he'd have to hold out. And therefore he, the Major, shouldn't know, either.

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Surely the Agency people had thought of that. Surely they had planned something to simulate the uncertainties of a real situation.

The Major thought about that. It worried him. He wondered if the Agency people intended to lengthen the test. That must be it. Nobody would come for him on that twenty-eighth night. They'd make him sweat for a few more days, maybe as long as a week.

Or they would trick him in another way. Perhaps they had filled some of the ration cans with water, or sand. It could be that. He would go along half starving himself to maintain food discipline—and then he'd find two or three useless cans.

He hefted each can, and shook it near his ear, but there was no way of telling what was inside. He'd have to wait. He couldn't open the cans early.

They would know that these doubts would occur to him. They would know he'd worry about them. They had planned it that way. It was part of the test. The tension, the strain. On top of the loneliness, on top of the fear. They had lied to him—lied for the good of the project, of course. But it was a dirty business, lying. You told the truth to your friends. That was the rule, wasn't it? It was the enemy you lied to.

The sounding of a siren deep in the city came echoing across the Park. He glanced uneasily around in the darkness, hearing something in that distant mechanical cry that made him want to speak out—to curse, to pray, anything—just to hear his own voice. But he was afraid to speak aloud; he was afraid.

He had premonitions of deep hunger. His limbs and eyes would ache. Sometimes he would drift in the delirium of fatigue. He worried about remembering things. When he filled his canteen at the lake, had he put in the purifier? Fear nagged at his senses, sharpening some, dulling others. He lost the exact count of his days—was it sixteen, seventeen?—but he had a greater awareness of the shape and touch of things.

He lived in the dark. He never saw the sun. By day he lay in his hole, sweating in the thick air, listening drowsily to the voices of people he could not see. He dreamed of capture, of death. When night came, he crept out, his body stiff, his bones aching, to face the dangers of the darkness.

One night he saw an old man shuffling along a path some thirty yards away, and he knew what would happen even before it occurred, as though it had taken place already in his dreams. Two

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figures rushed out of the dark; the old man fell at once to the ground beneath their blows. They tore at his clothing, searching for something of value. The Major crouched where he was, his knife open in his hand, but he was unable to intervene. He could not jeopardize the project.

Besides, the robbers moved with the swiftness of young men. He might not be equal to them, weakened as he was. They found nothing, and in their fury they kicked their victim, and stamped on his face before they ran off. The old man might be dead or dying, and yet the Major could do nothing, and so he turned away, in a rage that he had been the one to see that attack, impotent as he was, when those who might have helped were sleeping in comfort far away—the ones for whom the Park had been created, for whom it was patrolled and kept clean, and for whose amusement the zoo beasts were caged. The body would be found in the morning, and removed. They would not know about it. The incident was too common to warrant more than a line or two in the newspapers. At noon people would be walking over the very spot.

He saw other things on other nights—a dog stoned to death; a woman raped; a cripple beaten with his own crutch; a tramp sleeping in newspapers set afire and sent dancing, dressed in flames.

His anger left him. He watched as an animal might watch, ready at any moment to retreat and hide. The daytime people had lost the attributes of humankind. They were only voices, and footsteps. He could no longer imagine their faces. The ones who appeared at night were little more than shadows; still, they seemed more real to him. He thought about them often, wondering if any of these miserable, ferocious outcasts inhabited the Park as he did, hiding by day, prowling by night. He wasn't sure; he couldn't tell. But he wanted to believe there were at least a few. It made him feel less alone.

There were heavy rains for several days. His shelter was a morass. He himself was smeared with mud. His hands were blackened now. He thought that perhaps his face, too, had changed color, for the filth and dirt of the Park had been ground into his skin. He could feel his new-grown hair and beard stubble, and he wondered what he might look like, but he could not form a satisfactory picture in his mind.

He thought the full period had elapsed, but he wasn't sure. In any case, he had mastered the test; he had survived. But his achievement wasn't much. He had got through a few weeks. Those

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others—the night people of the Park—they had survived years. And in all that time no one had come to save them. No one had sought to arrange their escape.

He picked up his radio, and sent the signal. *I am here, I am here.* And the answer came back as always: *We hear you, we hear you.* But now he wondered—did they really hear him, were they listening?

For a time he was ill. He didn't know for how long. He lay in his burrow shivering with fever day and night. He had difficulty remembering why he was there, and pondered the matter, puzzled, until the answer came to him—oh, yes, the project. But it seemed to him that the project was not reason enough for him to be buried this way, alone and suffering and sick. There must be another, more important reason. He could not think what it might be.

His fever slackened, but he remained hidden. He did not care to leave his refuge. The project people might be searching for him, he realized. They would come at night with dogs and flares. But if they couldn't find him? If he'd hidden himself too well? Perhaps this time he had done that absolutely first-rate piece of work he had been struggling to do all his life—and it would be the end of him. How the Agency men would grumble. How annoyed with him they'd be. They might suspect that he had sabotaged the project on purpose, vanishing into the earth like that.

Or maybe they wouldn't come at all. Maybe they wouldn't search. They hadn't looked for the others—the other men who lived underground. They hadn't cared about them. Perhaps he, too, would be abandoned.

He crawled to the lake. He was too weak to stand. At the water's edge he plunged his head down and drank at the reflected lights of the buildings as though by drinking he could extinguish them. He drank the foulness of the water that had already put poison in him, but the lights remained on the surface, and when he roiled the water with his hand, the lights raced back and forth, dancing, shaking, as if quivering with laughter.

The days were hot now, the nights humid. There was the odor of decay everywhere. The rain slid down like grease. There was no grass to eat; it had been trodden away. The bark of the young trees was denied him, for somehow he had lost his knife. He scraped with his fingernails at the saplings, pulled weeds from the earth, leaves from the shrubs.

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It was clear to him now that he had misinterpreted the meaning of the test. The object wasn't survival. A man who wants to survive doesn't hide in the earth, doesn't make himself sick with loneliness and fear—no, no, a man who does that has been betrayed into doing it. *Good luck, Major.* They had sent him off to get rid of him. He wasn't quite good enough for their needs, and so they shoved him out with a Judas touch to bury himself among the other outcasts for the sake of the project, which was death.

He was expected to die. He knew that now. They did not really believe, did they, that a man shot out of the sky could be rescued? The risks were too great. No agent—if there were any agents—could be asked to undertake them. Rather, their intention was to prevent a pilot from surrendering by persuading him that all he had to do was find a hiding place and wait for a rescue that had never even been considered. It would be death that came instead.

The radio was the cleverest part of the trick. A desperate man would believe its lies right up to the end, but there was no one listening, not even a machine, for surely it was the radio itself that produced those answering responses, as if they came from far away: *We hear you.* That was the ultimate betrayal, to kill a man with hope.

He was to die, like those others who lived underground, the hopeless ones, too weak to strike out at the enemies who had promised to save them but didn't come, who gave them short rations and told them to eat grass, who'd shorn their heads to humiliate them into hiding. And the poor crippled fools, they had accepted all that, just as he had. They had been eager to make the project work—and if the daytime laughter overhead sometimes drove them to violence, all they were capable of doing was to maim and to kill one another.

The project was death. They were all to die. Very well, he thought, but let them die in the sight of their executioners, let them die in the open air, beneath the sun.

He left his refuge at noon, when the Park was crowded. The sun was blinding. At first he could hardly see the people among whom he staggered, his arms outstretched, feeling his way. He gestured impatiently at trees, bushes, rocks; he shouted for the others to come out of hiding, too. He went tottering about looking for them, commanding them to appear.

The crowds gathered to follow him, warily and at some distance until they saw how weak he was. He fell sometimes, and crawled,

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rose again to his feet and lurched forward, crying out a summons that went unanswered.

People came nearer; they circled around him. Boys ran up close, hooting. Women held their babies high, so they, too, could see, the young men jogged over from the playing fields, anxious to look at the green-headed man crusted with dried mud, the madman in rags, the zany, the fool howling in their midst—yes, all were eager to have a good look at him before the police arrived to bundle him away.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

DON'T BEG, BORROW, OR STEAL

by LOIS C. SURBER

As a detective
I may be defective,
But in matters of reading I'm keen.
So don't try to borrow,
Today or tomorrow,
My copies of "Ellery Queen."
There's no way to measure
The amount of pleasure
They bring to my housewifely scene,
So I'll lend you a dime,
Or even my "Time,"
But never my "Ellery Queen"!

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DETECTIVERSE

QUEENTESSENTIAL POEPOURRI

In Honor of the 50th Anniversary of *The Roman Hat Mystery*

by GERALD TOMLINSON

A bizarre house of brass
In a village of glass:
A terse dying message is heard;
Cold money may talk
And black myna birds squawk,
But with Wrightsvillains mum is the word.

Now half clues spell trouble,
The murders redouble,
And Queen takes a long phantom train;
On the fourth—no, eighth day
It's the devil to pay:
"Dean" queers it and calls Drury Lane.

Who's the last man to die?
Asks Queen's full Q.B.I.:
'Tis a French, Dutch, and Greek mystery;
Lane cops out, X to Z,
Says, "Three R's and mad tea
Aren't as simple as A, B, and C."

Enter gold-bugster Poe-
Cum-amontillado;
He's a terror to all alphabetters:
"From Rue Morgue to the Styx,
I've found just twenty-six—
E.Q., you've purloined my letters!"

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a *NEW* Jericho story by

HUGH PENTECOST

John Jericho, the artist-detective, is not a passionate devotee of horseracing, but he loves the way of life—the charm, the old-world traditions, the grace—of Saratoga in August. Now, "violence is inconceivable" in Saratoga in August, when the horses are running. But when Jericho, the avenger of man and beast, is on the scene . . .

THE MAN WHO STIRRED CHAMPAGNE

by HUGH PENTECOST

It has been said that the reason there are so many stray dogs in the town of Saratoga Springs, New York, during the month of August, is that they have rented their dog-houses to visiting canines. It is the custom of the human residents of the town to rent their gracious homes, surrounded by lush green lawns and shaded by ancient elms, to people who come there in August for the month of racing. It has been said that the rents for the month could amount to half of the purchase price of the property. But the racing buffs ignore the costs. There is only one Saratoga, only one place on earth for the genuine horse player to be in the month of August. From these undeniable facts comes the probable apocrypha about stray dogs.

"Like the horses," Jericho would say when he was asked, "I come to Saratoga in August to eat the grass."

Since Jericho was considered to be an eccentric, some people thought he might actually be telling the truth. He was a giant of a man, well over six feet tall with 240 pounds of well muscled body. His red hair, red beard, and mustache gave him the look of an old-time Viking warrior. Perhaps, some people thought, a diet of sweet clover and grass might account for his aura of incredible good health.

1979 by Hugh Pentecost.

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Anything could be true in Saratoga if you said it with authority–for instance, who will win the fifth race? There will always be someone to tell you, and it will be true until a different horse makes it a lie.

Going to Saratoga in August, wrote the late Joe Palmer, incomparable chronicler of the world of horses, "is a successful turning back of the pages, a stroll through the mirror, the slow drop of Alice down the rabbit hole. It is a month of living in about 1910."

Jericho, sitting in the grass, his back propped against a giant elm, making casual charcoal sketches of grooms cooling thoroughbreds who had just been working out on the track, of horses looking at him curiously over the tops of box-stall doors, felt that he was living comfortably in another age. He knew that the famous Mrs. Langtry, the Jersey Lily, and the probably infamous Diamond Jim Brady had walked in the grass right where he sat more than three quarters of a century ago.

In a world of turmoil and violence, of crime and man's inhumanity to man, there was an old-world grace, a strange peaceful tradition, a kind of forgotten style here at Saratoga that let you relax and forget–for the month of August. Horse people will tell you that after eleven months of racing in the big cities, at tracks like Aqueduct and Belmont, surrounded by cement and macadam and carbon monoxide fumes, Saratoga was good for man and beast. For the horses there was grass to eat; for the people the grandstand wasn't as crowded as those at the city tracks; for the State the share of the betting money was smaller, but surely there should be one time in the racing year when the prime concern was not the cash register. As Joe Palmer also wrote, "Any man who would change that would stir champagne."

On that morning when Jericho sat propped against a tree, sketching, there was, not far away, a man preparing to stir champagne.

Saratoga is not guarded by armed troops, like the city tracks. You don't need a pass to walk into Shed Row, where the horses are kept, fed, groomed, pampered, and even worshipped. You don't need an introduction to the person standing next to you. You presumably both belong to the same club, have a mutual interest in horses and the life that goes with them. You could have no other reason to be there and, therefore, you are friends with everyone. Saratoga in August.

The truth is that John Jericho is not a passionate devotee of the horse, but of the way of life that surrounds them, particularly at Saratoga in August. He is a man who has traveled the world, paint-

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ing in brilliant colors and with a kind of fierce outrage the daily history of violence. The result is that he is not only a painter but a persistent and deadly fighter against men who destroy their brothers for the sake of profit and power. Thieves, murderers, and warmakers of all races and creeds are his enemies, and a great many of them have learned, too late, that they would be well advised to stay out of his way. Saratoga in August is the place where, once a year, he takes time to regroup his energies, refresh his enormous vitality; where he sits in the shade, totally relaxed, idly sketching the horses and the people who surround them. It is his way of preparing for the next turn of the wheel. Violence is inconceivable in this old-world setting.

And yet, there was a man preparing to stir champagne.

Willie Jacobs, known as Slick to his friends, was one of the delights Jericho looked forward to each August at Saratoga. Jericho was a man who detested phonies and Willie Slick Jacobs was a total fraud. But a harmless one, an engaging one, Jericho noted. Slick was a character straight out of a Damon Runyan story. His language was a combination of Runyanese and the eloquent prose of the aforementioned Joe Palmer. Jericho, taken in from time to time, discovered after a little research that Slick was loaded with direct quotes from those two great men, quotes he appropriated as his own colorful inventions, and that he acted a role invented by those great men from the past.

There was nothing sinister about Willie the Slick. He knew horses. He worked at the business of being a character for the simple reason that it gave him entree to the world of people who live with and by horses. Willie the Slick didn't want to steal from them, or defraud them. He just wanted to be one of them.

Jericho had met Willie one day, half a dozen years ago. Jericho had been propped against his favorite elm tree, sketching. He found himself attracted to a little man with a sharp ferret's face wearing a checkered cap and a rather gaudy, vested summer suit. A tout, Jericho thought, and drew a wicked caricature of the little man.

Slick Jacobs approached him. "You drawin' a picture of me?" he asked.

Jericho handed him his sketch pad.

Slick looked stunned. "Gawd a'mighty, do I look like that?" he asked.

Jericho grinned at him. "To me," he said.

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Slick shook his head. "Maybe I oughta steer clear of you," he said. But he was fascinated by the other sketches of horses and people on the pages of the sketch pad. He sat down in the grass beside Jericho.

"They really pamper the horses," Slick said. "A hundred and fifty years ago they'd rub 'em down with whiskey and let 'em drink it, too. Twenty eggs the day they exercised. Some people believed in a pound of butter each day, washed down with a quart of English claret." Slick gave Jericho a sly look. "In those days when they said a horse was stiff, he was stiff!"

Jericho smiled back. "As Joe Palmer wrote in one of his inimitable columns."

"Jeese, I better steer clear of you," Slick said.

"Expert plagiarism is a gift," Jericho said.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

On that day, six years later, when trouble was brewing, Slick sought out Jericho under his favorite tree.

"Time to head for the grandstand, Dad," he said. He called Jericho "Dad" for no particular reason. They had a date to watch Foreclosure, considered the greatest horse of the day, run the seventh race.

Jericho rarely watched the races. His concern was with the backstage of the world of horses, but Slick had insisted that he simply couldn't bypass the chance to see the great Foreclosure do his stuff.

Slick and Jericho made their way around the far end of the track to the grandstand. The parade to the post for the seventh race had already begun.

"Look at him!" Slick said. "Ever see anything like it? He looks like a plow horse."

Different horses have a different approach to the moment of truth. Some of them, tense, prancing, are led to the starting gate by an outrider on a stable pony. Some of them, with only the jockey in control, seem prepared to take off for the moon at any moment. Then there is the rare one, like Foreclosure, who just ambles down the track, relaxed, unexcited by the noise of the crowd or the nearness of the contest for which he is prepared, coddled, trained.

Foreclosure, a big bay stallion, unbeaten in three years of racing, was the picture of relaxation. Jimmy Coombs, the jockey who had ridden him in all his big races, exerted no pressure on the reins. Foreclosure just ambled along, fourth in the parade.

"He don't waste anythin' on the way to work," Slick said. He

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obviously loved the big horse, as did the applauding spectators in the grandstand and along the rail. Foreclosure turned his head, ears pricked, as if to acknowledge the cheers that he evidently knew were meant for him.

The horses turned at the far end of the track and approached the starting gate, where handlers on foot waited to lead them into their appointed starting stalls.

"In like a lamb and out like a lion," Slick said.

Foreclosure walked into the Number 4 slot and stood quietly while the other horses, exhibiting varying degrees of tension and excitement, were led into place, the gates closed behind them.

"The horses are in place," the track loudspeaker told the crowd. "Hammerlock in the Number 6 spot is giving the handlers a little trouble and–*they're off*!"

The horses broke from the gate, and at that same moment the crowd was on its feet, screaming. The great Foreclosure, normally a fast starter from the gate, had gone completely haywire. He came out bucking and kicking. He barged into the Number 5 horse on his right, knocking that one off stride. He swerved in and smashed into the Number 3 horse, unseating the jockey. He headed outside again and charged into the rail, throwing Jimmy Coombs over his head and into the crowd.

Then Foreclosure raced down the track, nostrils flaring, dark with sweat, still bucking like a rodeo horse broken loose from a cattle pen. Riderless, he pounded his way through the horses that were ahead of him and then, at the first turn, he kept right on to the fence and sailed over it and into the screaming crowd.

Slick, jumping up and down in an effort to see over the heads of the people in front of him, was swearing, tears streaming down his cheeks. The crazed Foreclosure was a symbol of everything he cared for on this earth.

Very few people, except perhaps those who had bet on him, noticed that Slim Jim, a 40-1 outsider, won the seventh race at Saratoga that afternoon by six lengths.

Rumors spread like a forest fire around the track. An ambulance had taken Jimmy Coombs to the hospital. Some said he was dead. Some said he had broken limbs or a concussion. What about the jockey who had been knocked off the Number 3 horse? He'd walked away from the spill, miraculously unhurt.

But the big question was Foreclosure. Had he been caught without

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serious injury? What could have driven him into such a frenzy?

"Only pain–pain he couldn't stand," Slick said, as he and Jericho wedged their way through the crowd toward Shed Row where there would be answers.

Foreclosure had finally been brought down by cowboy skills as he reared and kicked his way through the crowd at the far end of the track. A couple of dozen people had been injured–how seriously there were no reports as yet–before some stablehands managed to lasso the berserk horse and bring him down, sweat-smeared, bleeding from the mouth and from wounds in his forelegs where he had hit the fence breaking out of the track. A track veterinarian had managed to sedate the struggling Foreclosure and he had been carried back to his stable on Shed Row in a horse ambulance.

A huge crowd had gathered around the stable, waiting for some news about the horse's condition. Slick Jacobs knew everyone backstage, including the security men who had roped off the area to keep the curious from barging right into the animal's stall.

Eventually an old man, his face tear-stained, came out of the stall. He was Mike Greenleaf, the groom whose job it was to care for the champion thoroughbred. He seemed to grab onto Slick, someone he knew and trusted.

"You wouldn't believe," he said, nodding to Jericho when Slick introduced them. "His mouth. Of course Jimmy Coombs tried to stop him when he bolted, yanked him around pretty bad. But that isn't what did it. It's like his mouth was burned out with acid."

"Acid!"

"That's what the vet thinks. Burned the poor baby's mouth raw as hamburger."

"How?" Slick asked, not believing. "He walked into the starting gate quiet enough, Mike."

Mike Greenleaf nodded. "Either it was squirted into his mouth at the last minute, or it was contained in a capsule, maybe fastened to his bit, that he bit into, or that dissolved just as the starting gate opened."

"You saddled him for the race, didn't you, Mike?" Slick asked. "Wouldn't you have noticed if anything was fastened to his bit?"

"You'd think I would, wouldn't you? Well, I didn't. I got to go, Slick. The track stewards are holding an inquiry."

"The only person who could have squirted anything into his mouth is the handler who led him into the starting gate," Slick said.

Greenleaf nodded. "Eddie Stevens. They're trying to locate him."

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"What about Foreclosure? Is he going to make it all right?"

"Who knows?" Greenleaf said bitterly. "He may never let anyone put a bit in his mouth again–we may never be able to handle him in another race."

"The horse's owner?" Jericho asked, speaking for the first time.

"Jeb Faulkner," Greenleaf said. "He's out on the West Coast. He has a couple of horses running out there. They're trying to get him on the phone now."

Slick and Jericho watched the old groom walk off.

"Acid!" Slick said. "Some bum really did stir the champagne."

Jericho had made friends over the years of his visits to Saratoga. Finding a place to stay for a month wasn't easy. Among the people who rented estates there for August was Ruth Prentiss, one of the great ladies in the world of racing. Mrs. Prentiss was also a patron of the arts and the owner of several of Jericho's paintings. There was a small apartment over the garage of the estate she rented and it was Jericho's for the asking. Slick and Jericho went there.

"I've got some forty-year-old bonded anti-freeze there that I think I could use," Jericho told Slick. "Anti-freeze" was a synonym for bourbon whiskey. Jericho didn't want to drink in a bar surrounded by mobs of people all talking about the disaster to Foreclosure. A deep anger was burning in his gut. The senseless cruelty to the great horse, who could be worth more than a million dollars to his owner when he was syndicated and put out to stud, was as evil a crime as anything that Jericho had seen man do to man.

"Someone probably made a killing on that race," he said to Slick as he poured bourbon over ice in two old-fashioned glasses. Neither man wanted his liquor diluted. "That Slim Jim paid forty-to-one."

"The totalizator will show that up if there was any heavy betting on him at the track," Slick said.

"Offtrack betting parlors all over the country," Jericho said. "Hundreds of hundred-dollar bets scattered around the country. Would they show up?"

"In time," Slick said. "But let me tell you about Slim Jim. He's a sprinter, not a distance horse. That race was a mile and a quarter. Slim Jim can't run that far. He was in there to set a fast pace for the first few furlongs. Foreclosure would have run him into the ground over the distance. He'd have been at the end of the parade when the race ended if it hadn't been that all hell broke loose."

"But if someone knew it was going to happen?"

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"Slim Jim is owned by a guy named Rod Cross. Decent guy, good young owner. His father was Martin Cross who raced good horses ever since I was a kid. No shenanigans from him. What happened? Slim Jim broke fast from the gate, like he was supposed to. He was ahead of the field when Foreclosure stampeded. Everyone behind him was pulling up, trying to get out of Foreclosure's way. Slim Jim just kept running with nobody able to take out after him until it was too late. I'll bet if you look at a film of the race you'll see that Slim Jim was staggering the last quarter mile, but he was ten lengths ahead by then in the confusion. I'll bet you Rod Cross didn't have two bucks on him. Slim Jim wasn't supposed to win, just set the early pace."

"It wouldn't have to be anyone who owned or trained Slim Jim, would it?" Jericho asked. "Anyone who knows racing, like you, would know that Slim Jim would be in the lead at the start. If the race could be disrupted behind him–?"

Slick Jacobs didn't seem to hear. He'd picked up Jericho's sketch pad which the big man had tossed down on a table when he set about making drinks.

"When did you do this?" he asked. He'd been flipping the pages, casually interested. Now he was riveted on a sketch of two men, leaning against a fence rail somewhere, watching a horse who was being walked cool in the background.

"Why?" Jericho asked. "What about it? Sometime just after breakfast this morning. Friends of yours?"

Slick's finger wasn't quite steady as he pointed at one figure, dressed in blue jeans, a plaid sports shirt, and Western boots.

"That one is Eddie Stevens," Slick said. "He's the guy they're looking for. He handled Foreclosure in the starting gate."

"You know the other one?"

"Sure I know him," Slick said. "He's Joe Salmin, gangster type who isn't very popular around race tracks anywhere. Strong-arm wheeler-dealer. You suppose–?"

"That horse in the background," Jericho said. "That's Foreclosure. Just finished an easy canter on the track, preparing for this afternoon's race."

"And two and two makes four," Slick said.

"If you can prove it," Jericho said.

"The track stewards would like to see that sketch, I'll bet," Slick said. "And the State Police, too."

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Over the years John Jericho had developed a healthy respect for the professional skills of the police, but the legal restrictions under which they operated were another matter. You had to read a criminal his rights. You couldn't third-degree a confession out of a man, no matter how monstrous his crime. "*Poor baby's mouth raw as hamburger*," old Greenleaf had said. An innocent animal ruthlessly tortured–for profit! "*Read the prisoner his rights.*" Damn his rights, Jericho thought.

"Where can we find Eddie Stevens?" he asked.

"Somewhere between here and Mexico," Slick said. "Paid off and took off."

"And this Joe Salmin? He wouldn't take a powder, would he? It might draw attention to him."

"He rents a cottage down at the south end of town for the month of August," Slick said. "Some local yokel let's him have it each summer. Probably knows he'll get his arm broke if he doesn't."

"Let's see if Mr. Salmin will be interested in my sketch," Jericho said.

"That's not a safe idea, Dad," Slick said. "Joe Salmin's apt to blow your head off when he sees it."

A muscle along Jericho's jaw rippled under his red beard. "That could be dangerous if I wasn't ready for it," he said.

The Lyman cottage at the south end of Saratoga was a pleasant little place, surrounded by a white picket fence. At the rear of it was a small garden, bright with summer flowers. Joe Salmin, overlord of crime, sat there in a wicker armchair, drinking what looked like a pleasantly cool gin and tonic. Counting his money, Jericho thought. He was a big man, dark-haired, wearing a gaudy sports shirt and light beige slacks. His size pleased Jericho, who never liked to fight a smaller man.

Salmin turned his head as he heard the garden gate open. "What the hell are you doing here, Slick?" he asked.

"Friend of mine wanted to meet you, Mr. Salmin," Slick said. "He has something I thought you'd like to see." He held out Jericho's sketchbook, opened to the right drawing.

Salmin took the drawing and looked at it, a nerve twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"I remember seeing you out at the track this morning," he said to Jericho. "You do this for fun, or you make your living at it?"

"You might say both," Jericho said. He moved casually, so that he was standing behind the gangster, looking over his shoulder.

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"It's good," Salmin said. "How much you want for it?"

"Oh, the price isn't prohibitive, Mr. Salmin," Jericho said. "Just some information–like, where is Eddie Stevens? And what are the names of the people who placed bets on Slim Jim for you all around the country?"

Salmin started to heave up out of his chair. Jericho's left arm went around his neck, jerking him back. His right hand closed on Salmin's right wrist and twisted the arm behind the man's back. In spite of himself the gangster cried out in pain.

"Be good enough to pull Mr. Salmin's tooth, will you, Slick?" Jericho said softly. "He's carrying a gun in a holster under his left arm."

Slick, as if he were walking on eggs, came slowly forward. Salmin lashed out at him with a booted foot.

"Now, now, Mr. Salmin, none of that," Jericho said. "I can start out by breaking your arm. And if you insist, I can break your neck. If you please, Slick."

Slick came forward and snatched the gun out of Salmin's holster. He backed away, holding the gun in a shaking hand.

"Be good enough to point that somewhere else, Slick," Jericho said. "And now, Mr. Salmin, where is Eddie Stevens?"

"I don't know any Eddie Stevens," Salmin said, half strangling for breath.

"The other man in my sketch," Jericho said. "The man you were talking to about acid."

The gangster started to struggle, but Jericho pulled up painfully on his arm.

"I guess you can stand pain, Mr. Salmin," Jericho said. "But I think I have something that you can't stand." He looked steadily at Slick. "Be good enough, Slick, to hand me that little bottle of acid we found in Eddie Stevens' room."

Slick stared at his friend like a man in a trance, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Come on, Slick, we haven't got all day," Jericho said.

Slick put a hand in his pocket and brought it out, his fist closed around something. He came forward, stiff-legged, and held out that fist to Jericho. Jericho put his knee into the middle of Salmin's back and jerked his head back. He released the gangster's right arm and reached out for what Slick apparently was holding in his closed fist. Salmin, his head bent back so that he looked up into the sky, struggled weakly.

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"What I've got here, Mr. Salmin, is the acid you prescribed for Foreclosure. When I start to pour it into your eyes you will never see another summer sunset, or the flowers in this garden, or another horserace, or the profit figures at the bottom of the accounting sheet your men send you."

"All right! All right!" Salmin cried out, a pent-up scream. "Eddie's on his way to the Albany airport where a chartered plane is waiting to fly him out of the country."

"Go into the cottage, Slick, and call the police," Jericho said. "Tell them to stop any chartered plane preparing to leave the Albany airport. Meanwhile, Mr. Salmin, the names of the people who placed bets for you, please." He held his closed fist over the gangster's terrified eyes.

"I thought you must have gone out of your mind!" Slick said. "Asking me for acid we found in Eddie's room. What room? What acid? I almost blew it."

The two men were back in Jericho's room, sipping the bonded anti-freeze again. The Saratoga cops had carted off Joe Salmin. Airport security people had snatched Eddie Stevens when he arrived there.

"It turned out to be a great tongue loosener," Jericho said. "I knew I could count on you, Slick. You spend your life acting a role, and I knew you'd improvise well when it was required of you."

"Brother! I almost asked you what the hell you were talking about!" Slick shook his head. "How could he believe that you'd really pour acid in his eyes?"

"I suspect Mr. Salmin has done just as terrible things as that to other men," Jericho said. "A man who is capable of brutal torture has to believe that other men are capable of the same monstrous actions." He raised his glass. "It seems our Mr. Salmin stirred the champagne once too often."

"Q"

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a *NEW* Rand adventure by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Jeffery Rand, former head of the Department of Concealed Communications and known as the Double-C Man, has been retired from active service for nearly a year. True, British Intelligence has called him back on urgent but temporary assignments (and probably will again and again); but this time Rand's problem is more than the breaking of a code—it is so personal and vital that his life and happiness are at stake . . .

THE SPY WHO WAS ALONE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

On this afternoon in late September, when summer still lingered under the pressures of the approaching English autumn, Jeffery Rand drove into the yard of his little country house without a care in the world. He'd been retired from British Intelligence for nearly a year, and was settling down at last to writing the book he'd always planned to do. His wife Leila was beginning her second term of teaching archeology at nearby Reading University, having extracted a promise from him never again to be lured into government service, even on a temporary basis.

"I'm home!" he shouted to Leila as he came through the door, expecting to find her relaxing in the living room after her first day back at the University. When she wasn't there he tried the kitchen, and then called upstairs. There was still no answer.

He glanced out the rear door and saw the empty garage. She wasn't yet home–delayed, no doubt, by her first-day duties. He sighed and went to the sideboard to pour himself a drink. That was when he noticed the missing statue. It was a reproduction of an Egyptian cat–one of Leila's favorites–and it had always stood on the coffee table.

Odd.

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He began to notice a few other missing things as well–a small silver vase, a set of books on ancient Egypt, a framed photograph of Leila at the pyramids. All were her possessions.

And all were missing.

He went upstairs, convinced now that something was wrong. In the bedroom he opened her closet and his heart skipped a beat.

All her clothes were gone.

Every last stitch.

What was this? What was happening?

He ran back downstairs and looked in the kitchen. Her favorite cookbook was missing.

"Leila!" He called her name again, then went out to the garage. It seemed exactly as it had been this morning, when he watched her drive off to the University.

The University!

Rand hurried back inside to the telephone and dialed the number that had been hers during the last term. It rang for some time before an unfamiliar voice answered. "Is Leila Gaad–Leila Rand–there, please?"

"Leila Rand?" the woman repeated. "I'm afraid not."

"This is her office, isn't it?"

A pause, and then, "I understand Leila Rand is not teaching this term. I believe she has resigned."

"Resigned! Why, that's impossible!"

"I'm sorry. You'll have to speak with the Dean for any further information."

The connection was broken and Rand was left holding a dead telephone.

Impossible!

Yet so was what he found here–the clothing and the other things just . . . gone! The whole thing was impossible!

He sat down and tried to think. Then he got up and paced. There were no near neighbors, and Leila hadn't made any new friends living out here in the country. Her old friends were back in Egypt, where Rand had met her. Where could she possibly be?

He decided to search the house.

It was not that large and the search took only ten minutes. He discovered a few other missing items, all small and all Leila's personal property. And in the upstairs bathroom, the last place he looked, he found the note taped to the mirror.

His eyes blurred as he read the words, seeing them all at once in

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a rush of disbelief: *Jeffrey– It's better we part. Noways try to find me. –L.*

She had left him.

For what? For another man?

His mind refused to grasp the fact. They'd been married less than a year, and he could swear it had been a wildly happy year for both of them. Except for some assignments forced on him by British Intelligence, they'd been together all the time. Leila had even journeyed to Moscow to get him out of a particularly tight spot.

And now she had left.

Without a word except for this note.

No, he couldn't believe it.

Something was wrong, terribly wrong.

But where was she?

Later that evening he thought of Hastings, his old boss when Rand was in charge of the Department of Concealed Communications. He still had Hastings' unlisted home telephone number and he called him there.

"Well, Rand! Good to hear from you! I've been meaning to ring you up about the fine job you did for us in Amman."

"Hastings–"

"What is it?" Suddenly his voice reflected Rand's tenseness.

"Leila's gone. She's left me."

"Leila? But you two seemed so happy."

"We were happy. I don't know. It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't know. I suppose I thought she might have contacted you."

"No, not a word from her. Look here, Rand, why not drive into London tomorrow for lunch. We can talk about it."

"I was just in London today, seeing my publisher about the book."

"How's it coming?"

"What? Oh, the book. Well enough, I suppose–until now."

"Get a good night's sleep. Maybe things won't look quite so glum in the morning."

"But there was no reason for her to leave, Hastings! Don't you understand? No reason in the world! Everything was fine!"

"Yes. Well, ring me up at the office, Rand. Let me know about lunch. And try to get some sleep."

Rand hung up and started pacing again. He went back and read the note once more.

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Noways try to find me.

He couldn't remember Leila ever having used the word *noways*. But it was her handwriting. Of that there was no doubt.

Sometime after midnight he fell asleep in his chair.

He awoke early in the morning, when the first rays of sunlight brought the birds chirping to activity. It took him a moment to remember about Leila, and what he was doing sleeping in the chair. When he stood up his shoulder and neck were stiff. He rubbed them a bit and made a quick breakfast for himself, as he had so many times during his bachelor existence.

Then he drove to Reading.

The house that Rand and Leila had chosen for their married life was a little country place near Bracknell, on the edge of Windsor Forest. It was about halfway between the western edge of London and the city of Reading, where Leila had been teaching at the University.

It was just a bit over ten miles from their house to the University, and even with the heavy morning traffic Rand drove it in less than twenty minutes. Reading was a small city of barely 132,000 people. The medium-sized University had been affiliated with Oxford in its early days but had been independent for more than 50 years. Leila seemed to like it during her first term there, and Rand thought she'd been eager to return in the autumn.

He drove into Reading on London Road, but had to detour around some street construction before reaching the University. The city had the usual array of shops catering to the student population. There were bookstores, fast-food outlets, boutiques, and even an oyster bar. But he paid little attention to any of them. Presently he reached the University itself and parked in the visitors' lot.

Rand remembered just one name from those Leila had mentioned–a fellow instructor named Isabel Skrech. Her husband was a professor doing research in stress detection, and Leila had helped him out earlier in the summer by taking some psychological tests. Rand located Isabel just a few minutes before her first morning lecture, puffing on a cigarette as she studied her notes. "Mr. Rand–how nice to meet you at last! Leila mentioned you often. How is she?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. She seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared? How odd!"

"I was told on the phone that she'd resigned."

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"That's what I heard too. I believe the Dean received a letter over the weekend, or yesterday morning. I know he was quite disturbed by the short notice she gave."

"I would like to see that letter."

"I suppose I could ask him," she said after an instant's hesitation. "Come along."

After giving her students a brief reading assignment she led the way across the courtyard to a nearby building. The Dean was a flustery man with a red face who wasn't pleased to see Rand. "You must understand that a resignation on such short notice raises great problems for us, Mr. Rand."

"I'd like to see her letter if I may. Leila told me nothing of this, and I was under the impression she came here to begin the new term yesterday. When I arrived home from London last evening she was gone."

The Dean looked all the more unhappy. "We really can't concern ourselves with family difficulties."

"Could I see her letter of resignation?"

"Certainly."

He produced it from a folder on his desk and Rand read the brief lines: *I am sorry that personal problems preclude my teaching at Reading this term. Please accept my resignation. Leila Rand.*

"When did this arrive?"

"In the first mail yesterday morning. I tried phoning her for some sort of explanation, but there was no answer."

"No. I was in London and she was–" Where?

The letter was typewritten, not on their machine at home, and Leila's signature could easily have been forged. The apprehension that had played in his mind now took a firmer hold.

"I'm afraid that's all I can tell you," the Dean said.

Rand handed back the letter. "I don't believe she wrote this."

"My dear chap, I received the letter and your wife did not appear for the beginning of the term. That is all I know. Now if you'll excuse me–"

Outside, Isabel Skrech tried to comfort him. "Don't mind old Bosey. He's like that with everyone."

"Do you believe she's disappeared?"

"Well, she's certainly disappeared as far as you're concerned. But the question seems to be whether that disappearance is voluntary or not."

"I can't believe she'd leave me."

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Isabel took out one of her cigarettes. "Stranger things have happened. Leila always struck me as a very secretive person."

"No," Rand said, shaking his head. "Something's happened to her. I know it!"

"You mean you think she was kidnaped?"

"I don't know. There's been no ransom demand." Not yet, he added silently. There were a good many people interested in his former position with British Intelligence. Someone might well have taken Leila as a way of forcing him to deliver information.

If that was the case, they'd be making contact with him soon.

"I'd better get back home," he decided.

"If there's anything I can do–"

"Certainly. I'll call you if I hear any news."

He drove back home and arrived just as the postman was delivering the morning mail. There were the usual advertisements and a letter from an old friend in Dublin.

There was nothing from Leila.

He waited patiently through the afternoon, expecting a phone call at any moment. Once he thought of putting through a call to her relatives in Cairo, but he dismissed that as counterproductive. They would not have heard anything from her, and he might only worry them needlessly.

By early evening he'd lost hope that he would hear anything from her. He got out the note to read it again, because it was the last concrete link he had with their life together.

Jeffrey–It's better we part. Noways try to find me. L.

Noways.

That word stuck out again, as it had before.

And then for the first time he noticed something else. Though he spelled his first name J-E-F-F-E-R-Y, she'd used the more common spelling of R-E-Y.

Why would she spell his name wrong in a note saying goodbye?

To tell him something.

But what?

His whole adult life had been devoted to codes and ciphers. If she wanted to communicate with him, wouldn't she have used a code, knowing he'd break it? He remembered the message he'd sent from Moscow, using only the first letters of each word. That was worth a try.

J-I-B-W-P-N-T-T-F-M-L

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Nothing.

With only one vowel the letters couldn't be jumbled to form words. Even leaving off the *Jeffrey* and the final *L* was no help.

And yet, that *noways* was there for a reason, to make up something she needed for her cipher. He was sure of it.

The more he thought about it the more excited he became. A secret message meant she hadn't really left him, not of her own free will.

She'd spelled his name wrong for a reason, to attract his attention to the message and to tell him—what? That the letters were reversed?

That she was using the last letters instead of the first?

Leave off the *Jeffrey* again and—

S-R-E-T-S-Y-O-D-E

Still nothing.

Reversed. Try it backward.

E-D-O-Y-S-T-E-R-S

ED OYSTERS

Ed Oysters?

Or with the final *L*, Led Oysters?

No, he liked Ed Oysters better.

Half of a lifetime in Double-C, working on enemy ciphers, had taught him many lessons. He knew that real words sometimes formed themselves by chance, leading code-breakers on a merry chase down the wrong path.

Ed Oysters might be just such a chance formation, meaning nothing.

And yet, she'd used that word *noways*. And she'd misspelled his first name.

For a reason.

All right, all right. He would proceed on the assumption that the note contained a secret message and that the message was *Ed Oysters*. If the words meant nothing to him, what might they have meant to Leila?

A person's name? A man named Ed who ate oysters? A man named Ed who was somehow connected with oysters? This last seemed the most likely.

Oysters. He'd seen the word somewhere recently, this very day. An oyster bar in Reading, that was it, near the University.

It was a slim lead, but he had no other.

He got out the car and drove into Reading for the second time that day. It was growing dark when he arrived, and the streets were

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crowded with university students still exploring the city that was their new home. Several of them, men and women, stood in a group at the corner of Duke Street and Mill Lane, by the multi-story car park. The Reading Gaol Oyster Bar was just across the street and it was obviously a student meeting place. Though Rand didn't remember Leila mentioning it, he expected that the faculty went there on occasion too.

The inside was dim and crowded, reminding Rand of a smoky London club. On the walls near the entrance were the framed stanzas of Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the city's main claim to literary immortality.

A smiling man with a handful of menus approached Rand. "Would you like dinner, sir? We have a special seafood platter this evening–"

"I'm looking for Ed. Is he around?"

"Ed?" There was a flicker of hesitation on the man's face. "I don't believe I know him."

"I think he works here."

The man shook his head. "No, you must be mistaken."

"Is there another oyster restaurant in Reading?"

"We're the only one."

"All right. Sorry."

Rand turned to leave. The man might be lying, but there was no way of proving it. Rand was at a dead end. But as he was going out the door he decided on one more try. He wheeled around and made for the liquor bar near the front of the restaurant.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked him.

"I've got a message for Ed. It's important."

"Ed the waiter? He's off this week."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Couldn't tell you. Ask the boss." He nodded toward the man with the menus.

"What's his name?" Rand asked.

"Griffin. Joe Griffin."

"Thanks."

A crowd of young people entered at that moment, and Rand was able to slip out the door. He didn't want another run-in with Mr. Griffin, not just yet. There was an Ed who was a waiter at the oyster restaurant, and he was away this week. And the owner of the place was quick to deny his existence.

Rand sat in his car and thought about it. The fact that a man named Ed was connected with the oyster bar tended to confirm his

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decoding of Leila's note. And if she had left a note with a hidden message it meant she had not left willingly. She'd been kidnaped, or somehow forced to go along with this man Ed. She'd left for the University and been intercepted. They'd gone back for her things, and forced her to write the note.

But why? Why did they want her?

The plot, whatever it was, was not directed at Rand. There had been no ransom demand, no request for information. And they'd gone out of their way to make it appear that she'd left him of her own free will. They did not want to arouse his suspicions. That meant two things–they wouldn't be contacting him in the near future, and they wouldn't be returning Leila right away. In fact, the plot only made sense if they never intended to return Leila.

If they didn't want her because she was married to Rand, why did they want her? Was there something in her past, something in those Egyptian years before Rand knew her?

But if this was some sort of revenge, wouldn't an assault be more likely than a kidnaping?

They needed her for something. But for what?

His eyes fell on another group of students entering the restaurant. Leila's only connection with Reading was the University. If she'd met this waiter named Ed it was only because of her position as a lecturer at the University. Somehow the University was the key to her disappearance.

He found a telephone booth and looked up Isabel Skrech's home phone number. He called it but there was no answer. Returning to his car he drove down Queen's Road to Watlington Street and turned right. When he reached London Road–the route back home–he could see the shadowed towers of the campus among the trees across the street. There were still lights in many of the buildings and he decided it was worth a stop.

Isabel Skrech shared her office with another instructor who said Isabel might be found in the library if she hadn't gone home. Rand mounted the steps of the old building and made his way down a silent corridor to the reading room. Most of the faces at the tables were young but luck was with him. He spotted Isabel at one of the side tables, poring over the illustrations in a book on the treasures of King Tut's tomb.

"You startled me!" she said, jumping a bit as he spoke her name.

"I'm sorry. I wonder if we could talk some more, Isabel. It's quite important."

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She closed the book and stood up with a smile. "Certainly. Is it about Leila?"

Rand nodded. "Where can we talk without disturbing anyone?"

"Outside would be best. I was finished here anyway."

They strolled across the inner courtyard toward the parking area and Rand asked, "Tell me, Isabel, did you and Leila ever have lunch or dinner together off campus?"

"Oh, we might have, once or twice."

"At the oyster bar on Duke Street?"

"I think so, yes. A great many of the students go there."

"Did she ever talk to the waiters? Especially one named Ed?"

"Ed . . . I remember him. A stocky fellow with a broken nose. Leila wondered if he was an ex-boxer."

"Do you know his last name?"

"I don't think we ever heard it."

"Did he talk to her about her personal life?"

"No, just idle chatter about the students and such. Never anything personal."

They'd reached her little car by then and as she opened the door the inside light went on. Rand caught a glimpse of something familiar. "Isn't that Leila's scarf?" he asked, reaching suddenly inside to snatch the Nile green square of cloth from the seat. It still bore the tag of the Cairo shop where he'd bought it for her. "What are you doing with it?"

Isabel Skrech looked him in the eye. "She left it in the car last term. I brought it along to give her yesterday. You certainly don't think I'm connected with her disappearance, do you?"

He could not specifically remember Leila wearing the scarf during the summer months–but she wouldn't have worn it then anyhow. Isabel could be telling the truth. It might have been missing since the spring term. "Of course not," he apologized. "You'll have to excuse my jumpiness."

"I understand Leila's going off has upset you. But maybe you're seeing plots where none exist. Maybe you have to face up to the most likely explanation–that her note meant exactly what it said."

"I know. And you're right to remind me. But I have to keep looking for her. This man Ed–the waiter with the broken nose–can you tell me anything more about him?"

She thought for a moment. "No. Except that Ed is probably only a nickname. He's swarthy, dark-skinned. I'd guess him to be from the Middle East."

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"He speaks with an accent?"

"A slight one, yes."

"Interesting. Was there ever a hint that he might be Egyptian?"

"No–I think Leila asked him that, in fact. He's not Egyptian."

She slipped behind the wheel of the car. "Thank you, Isabel. You've been a big help."

She looked up at him and smiled. "I hope so. I hope you find her."

He drove back to the oyster bar and parked across the street. All the restaurants in Reading closed by 10:30, so he knew he wouldn't have too long to wait. It was a few minutes before eleven when the last of the customers had departed and Griffin left with one of his bartenders, turning out the lights and locking the door behind him. The two men parted at the car park nearby and Rand followed the restaurant owner.

If he'd hoped that Griffin would lead him to Leila, he was disappointed. The man drove directly to a modern country home a few miles out of town and went in. Rand could see a woman and two teenage children watching TV in the family room next to the garage.

He got back on London Road and headed home, feeling depressed. He was more certain than ever that Leila was being held prisoner somewhere, but there was still no concrete evidence he could present to the police. His only lead now seemed to be the waiter, Ed, and he'd have to pursue that in the morning.

Five miles out of Reading, traveling along the narrow highway, Rand suddenly became aware of a larger, heavier sedan coming up fast behind him. He moved over to let it pass, but the car came up next to him and started edging into his vehicle.

"Damn fool!" Rand muttered, hitting his horn, but the other car kept edging over. It was deliberately trying to run him off the road.

In the last instant before he hit the ditch he saw a glimpse of the man at the wheel–a man with a broken nose silhouetted against the glow of the rising moon. Then Rand's wheel spun out of control and he felt a sickening grind as the car lurched over, half on its side . . .

In the morning Rand phoned Hastings in London again. Hastings listened patiently to his story and finally said, "You're telling me they tried to kill you last night?"

"That's right. I believe it was this same man Ed–the one who kidnaped Leila."

"But you still don't have a motive? No effort has been made to contact you?"

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"None whatsoever. In fact, after last night I'd say just the opposite. They'll go to great lengths *not* to speak with me."

Rand could hear Hastings sucking in his breath. "I don't know," Hastings muttered, "even if your suspicions about Leila's being kidnaped are correct, it's an internal thing–Scotland Yard's baby, not ours."

"This man Ed is a Middle Eastern of some sort. It could be tied in with espionage or terrorism, and that would get you into the picture, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps," Hastings hedged. "It would depend on the circumstances."

"You mean which country was involved?"

"The government wouldn't want a diplomatic incident."

"For God's sake, Hastings, we're talking about my wife!"

"Leila is half Egyptian, Rand. This could all be something from her past."

"Half Egyptian and half British. Will you at least help me rescue the British half?"

There was a pause and then, "Let me get back to you."

Rand slammed down the phone in disgust. His car had been towed home, barely capable of operation, his body was bruised and battered, and his wife was now missing for two days. And Hastings would get back to him!

He went out to the car, pried open its dented left door, checked the headlights, and tried the motor. At first it wouldn't start, and he had visions of a broken fuel line; but finally the engine turned over and started.

All right. Maybe things weren't as bad as he thought. At least Ed hadn't come back to take a shot at him after his car hit the ditch.

Maybe they didn't really want to kill him. Maybe the man in the car wasn't Ed at all. Maybe Rand was imagining the entire plot.

Maybe Leila had simply walked out on him.

No. No more thoughts like that.

He got out of the car on the driver's side and checked the paint scrapes on the right door. There was no doubt that he'd been hit several times. It was no accident, but a deliberate attempt to kill or maim him.

He was debating his next move when he heard the phone in the house ringing. He ran to answer it and heard Hastings on the other end. "Still thinking about it?" Rand asked sarcastically.

Hastings sighed, sounding like the tired warrior whom Rand had

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known for so many years. "The waiter's name is Edim el Baiz. He's in our computer."

"For what reason?"

"Affiliation with known terrorists."

"Egyptian, is he?"

"Turkish citizenship, but that doesn't mean much."

"What would he want with Leila?"

"I've no idea."

"Do you have an address for him?"

"Berkeley Avenue, in Reading. But I don't want you going there alone."

"What's the number?"

Hastings gave it, reluctantly. "Be careful, Rand."

The house was a big brick place set back from the busy avenue. The grass was tall in the front yard and Rand knew at once what he would find inside. It was empty, and judging by the grass it had been for some weeks.

Edim the waiter was in the computer, so he'd gone into hiding before the operation commenced. They'd have Leila at some other house, a safe house even the computer didn't know about.

He sat in the car for a long time, thinking about what little he knew. Why would anyone–especially Middle East terrorists–want to kidnap Leila?

Because she was married to Rand? No, they'd made no effort to contact him.

Because she was Egyptian? Unlikely–there were many Egyptians living in London who'd make bigger headlines than Leila. Because she was an archeologist? That wasn't a subject to interest terrorists.

Rand sat tapping the steering wheel of his car. There was just a possibility–

He turned the car around in a driveway and headed back to the center of town. It took him only a few minutes to reach the University and to learn that Isabel was off that day. He obtained her address from the faculty directory and headed out toward Gosbrook Road on the north side of town.

Isabel Skrech's house was a pleasantly large place with a colorful garden running down to the road. Someone–she or her professor husband–spent a great deal of time in it. It was the husband who came to the door when Rand rang. He blinked his eyes behind dark-framed glasses and asked, "Can I help you?"

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"Professor Skrech? My name is Rand. Your wife Isabel is a friend of my–"

"Oh, yes! Come in, Mr. Rand! Isabel has been telling me about your wife's disappearance."

He led the way into a large living room decorated in a subdued modern style. Isabel entered from the kitchen and seemed surprised to see him. "What is it? Have you located Leila?"

"No, not yet."

Professor Skrech hovered over him solicitously. "May I get you a drink?"

"No, no–nothing." Rand was looking at Isabel. "I wonder if I could speak to you alone."

"I have no secrets from Max. Is it about Leila?"

Rand nodded. "I accused you falsely about that scarf. I don't want to make another mistake."

Professor Skrech sat down, looking concerned, but Isabel continued to stand. "What is it now?" she asked a trifle petulantly.

"You said I should face up to the possibility that her note meant exactly what it said. But I never told you she left me a note, Isabel."

"Well . . . Maybe I just assumed that she had." But the color had drained from her face.

"And what were those psychological tests you tried on her, Professor? It all ties in, somehow. You two have got her, haven't you?"

Max Skrech looked annoyed. Without moving from his chair he spoke one word. "Edim."

Rand tried to turn but he wasn't fast enough. The man with the broken nose had come through the door behind him and suddenly Rand's arms were pinned to his sides.

"Tie him up," Professor Skrech ordered. "If he gives you any trouble, you know what to do."

Silently cursing his stupidity, Rand allowed himself to be tied to a straight-backed chair. The man named Edim worked silently and efficiently. When he'd finished, Isabel walked over to stand in front of Rand. "I'm sorry it happened this way. We were trying to keep you out of this."

"Where is she?"

Isabel's husband answered. "Upstairs. She hasn't been harmed–only given something to make her sleep."

"You need her for something. You need her knowledge for something."

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"That's quite correct," Professor Skrech said. "It is a devious plot involving a great many other people in America and in Europe. We needn't bore you with details."

"I like to be bored. If I'm going to die, I'd like to know the reason."

"Who said anything about dying? As a matter of fact, you're just what we need to make Leila more cooperative."

But Isabel Skrech must have seen the foolishness of the charade. "For God's sake, tell him, Max! You know we'll have to kill them both."

He shot her a black look, then turned back to Rand. "We are associated with a group trying to bring about an equitable solution to the Middle East problem."

"Terrorists!"

"I never use that word. Nevertheless, it is a group that needs a great deal of cash for its endeavors. In recent weeks several of this group have slipped into America. They are going to raise the money in a special way–through what you might call a caper. At this moment fifty-five items from the tomb of King Tut are touring American museums and attracting record crowds."

It was all clear to Rand now. "That book in the library, Isabel! You were so startled when I found you reading it!"

"What's this?" Skrech asked his wife.

"Nothing. I was glancing through a book on Tut and he surprised me."

"Foolish!" he muttered, but then turned back to Rand. "While the exhibit is en route between cities tomorrow, several of the smaller items will be stolen and replaced with copies. They will be flown over here, hidden in a shipment of machine parts. And that is where Leila comes in."

"You need her to verify the authenticity of the pieces."

"Exactly. She's an archeologist with close ties to the Cairo Museum. We couldn't ask for a better person."

"And she won't be missed afterwards, when you kill her," Rand added. "A famed art expert or museum director would create too great a stir if he disappeared. But how will you know if she's telling the truth about the pieces?"

Professor Skrech smiled broadly. "You mentioned the psychological tests she helped me with, and you know my field of study is stress detection. The tests were to verify that your wife would be a good subject for lie-detection machines and–if needed–the so-called truth serum. It doesn't matter if she lies or not after she inspects

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the stolen objects from the Tut collection. We'll know the truth. And if our American friends haven't pulled a double-cross, the authenticated treasures will be passed on to wealthy collectors in Switzerland and elsewhere."

"The Egyptian government will discover the theft sooner or later."

"Certainly. But we hardly care about them. They have already proved themselves traitors to our cause."

Rand took a deep breath. He could wait no longer. "Let me see her."

"You will, soon enough," Isabel said. "Having her leave the note was my idea. We'd forged her resignation letter in advance, of course, and Edim intercepted her on London Road after she left you Monday morning. But we thought she might need her books on ancient Egypt to verify the pieces from the Tut collection, and decided to bring her clothes and other things too, so you wouldn't notice that just the books were missing. I had her write the note to strengthen the idea that she'd left you."

"I noticed the missing books, but I didn't think about them. You were clever."

"So was she. I let her use her own wording in the note and she slipped a message in, didn't she?"

Rand nodded. "She couldn't get *Isabel* in so she had to settle for *Ed Oyster*. Now are you going to let me see her?"

Max Skrech motioned to Edim. "Untie him but keep your gun ready. If he tries anything shoot him."

Edim pointed a small pistol at Rand's head while he untied the rope. Then he ordered him up the stairs. The door at the top was locked and Rand waited, hands raised, while the waiter opened it. Edim motioned with the gun for Rand to enter first and when he did he saw the tiny shape under the blanket on the bed. He ran to her, pulling back the covers, but there was only a puffed-up pillow there.

Then he heard the thud and turned to see Edim el Baiz topple to the floor. Leila, beautiful Leila, was standing behind the door with an upraised flower pot.

"I thought you'd never come," she said.

Rand scooped up the fallen weapon and pointed it at Isabel and her husband in the doorway. Then he told Leila, "Call the police and then phone Hastings in London. I'll keep these two covered."

She blew him a kiss as she went for the phone. "It's good to have you back, Jeffery."

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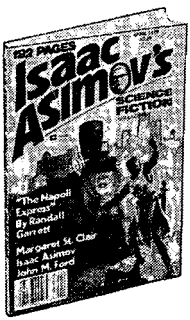

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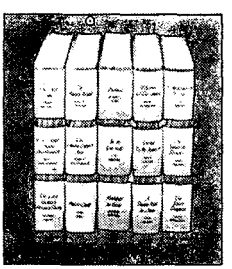

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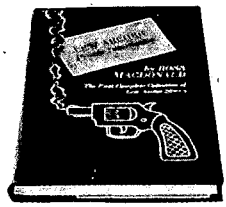

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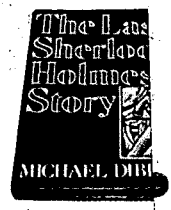

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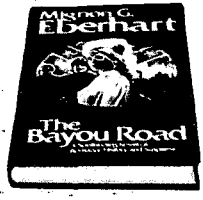

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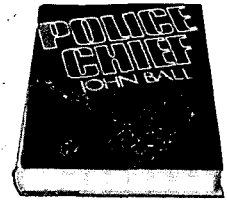

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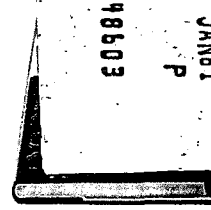

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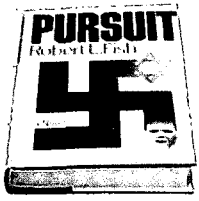

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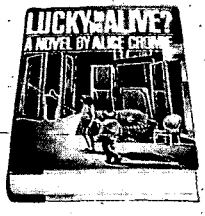

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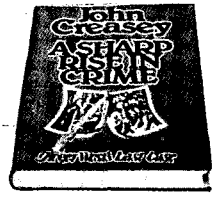

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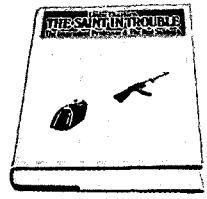

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